



## Parallels in Development of Modern Painting and Enameling in China

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**Abstract.** This paper highlights trends in the development of contemporary visual art in China through a parallel analysis of two of its components: painting and enamel art. The focus of the research is on the work of artists whose works combine a ‘western’ style with ‘eastern’ tradition. It was found that in the 21st century, the layer of Chinese cultural heritage was successfully transformed into new forms of expression, such as art objects, enamel sculptures, brightly colored paintings and more. At the same time, it has preserved the symbolism of color, plasticity of lines, narrative and figurative components, which is typical of the centuries-old traditions of the Celestial Empire. Artistic analysis was carried out on specific pictorial and enamel examples, distinguishing common and distinctive features in the concepts of the artists and their embodiment in the material. The way in which contemporary art enters the urban space of megacities and the interior of public institutions was analyzed. In conclusion, it is emphasized that the combination of ‘traditional’ and ‘recent’ trends in one work help to rethink the role of classical images in today’s art, as well as to identify Chinese artists in the globalized intercultural space.

**Keywords:** *Chinese art; contemporary art; enameling; hot enamel; interior; modern painting; sculpture.*

### 1 Introduction

The modern history of China began in the middle of the 19th century, when large-scale social and cultural changes occurred as a result of the multiple wars. Western ideology and culture gradually penetrated the Chinese environment and influenced all kinds of art. Until that moment, being in complete isolation and under the influence of tradition, Chinese artists in general and painters in particular changed only in terms of improving their skills. Thus, the traditions of calligraphy and painting, which have always been characterized by the continuity of cultural heritage, encountered foreign influences for the first time [1]. In parallel to the break with national painting, the influence of Western art on Eastern art occurred, which contributed to new creative explorations by local artists [2]. The transition from tradition to modernity formed three types of

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works, namely ‘change based on tradition’, ‘continuation of the old and creation of the new’ and ‘representation of the West to enrich the East’, which significantly expanded the aesthetic dimension of Chinese paintings [3].

The fall of the empire and the proclamation of the Republic in the early twentieth century, after half a century of political chaos and war, deeply affected all of China’s cultural life, including painting and enameling. There was a radical departure from tradition and genre improvisation (the Shanghai, Beijing and Linan schools were founded).

This study analyzed the parallels between the development of modern painting and enamel art in China. For a proper understanding, it should be stressed that Chinese painting originates from the art of calligraphy and for many centuries was an integral part of it. At a time when Western artists relied on the play of color and light and shadow, the artists of the Celestial Empire spoke by the power of lines, images and symbols. The two complementary types of writing *gunbi*, (‘thorough brush’) and *se-yi* (‘idea transfer’ or ‘rough brush’), were eventually reduced to the dominance of the latter, marked by the transformation of details into the generalization of the idea, hyperbolism, associative thinking with a combination of calligraphic lines, drawn impromptu under the influence of instant mood. We see the continuation of this style in contemporary abstract art, where under the influence of modernism and avant-garde influences of Western art, the traditional Chinese calligraphic line is gaining new meaning.

The influence of calligraphy, the combination of local color with graphic nuances, symbolism and genre, can be seen also in enamel, which in this study was analyzed in the works of Chinese artists.

## 2 Literature Review

Following the purpose of this study, in order to draw parallels between the development of modern Chinese painting and enameling, a number of publications on fine arts were analyzed, in particular the fundamental works on the history of Chinese art by Titarenko [3] and Zavadzka [4]. Among the studies of modern scholars, especially the work of Polyakova [5] is worth noting, in which the author analyzes the traditions of color symbols in Chinese painting. The development of painting is meaningfully analyzed in the studies of Kwon [1] and Hammers [2]. However, the impact of global trends and technological developments on the continuity of traditional painting remains undiscussed.

In the course of the research, publications on enamel technology and its varieties, in particular painted and partitioned, were meaningful [6,7]. It was

found that most publications cover the enamel art of China up to the twentieth century or modern hot enamel as part of the arts and crafts [8-10]. Thus, it is important to analyze modern enamel sculptures and art objects as new forms of expression for concepts of artists using the ancient technique of enameling.

In this regard, the publications of Burchmore [11] were valuable in helping to better understand the conceptual basis of Ah Xian's work, which is common to the ceramic and enamel works of the artist. Additionally, sites, museum collections and auction collections with works by the artists Ding Yi, Huang Yuxing, Lam Tian Xing, Ah Xian and Shi Junyu were analyzed.

### **3 Purpose of This Study**

To trace the parallels of the development of modern trends in painting and enameling in China.

### **4 Methodology**

This study used a set of general philosophical, historical, cultural and art methods, taking into account the principles of scientific objectivity, comprehensiveness, scientific reliability, as well as art, technical and technological and design approaches.

### **5 Results**

The art of hot enameling in China has a long history, dating back to the Ming Dynasty. During this period until the beginning of the 21st century, enamel developed, its technology was improved while its scope, narrative and contents were expanded. Given the current state of this ancient technology, it is worth noting two lines of development of this art in China: traditional and modern.

The first was common in imperial court cloisonné (*jing-tai lan* 景泰) and painted enamels (*hua fa-lan* 畫琺琅), which are still used for practical purposes in usable objects such as vases, dishes, snuff boxes and more. Decorating things in traditional techniques using national features, reproducing medieval artifacts and making variations on this theme at present occurs in mass production. The reason for this is conservatism, imitation and preservation of own traditions by the Chinese population. A precondition was the significant interest towards Chinese culture in Europe, in particular arts and crafts, during the 18<sup>th</sup> to 20th centuries (Shinuazri).

The second and more recent line, in contrast, is influenced by European contemporary art. By ‘modernizing’, Chinese artists sometimes completely broke the connection with the concept of the ‘traditional’ and the ‘national’ in art. The dominance of today’s artistic methods is the search for novelty and absolute freedom, non-figurative conventionality and representation [12]. Since the 1970s until today, the work of art and culture in general has been radically rethought. The power of the idea or the concept behind a work comes to the foreground and often prevails over its form.

Similar development trends have taken place in the field of fine arts. Thus, the consequences of the effects of globalization in the 20<sup>th</sup> to the 21<sup>st</sup> century have deeply affected all spheres of human activity. Visual art in general and painting in particular are no exception. The global exchange of knowledge, technology and experience has led on the one hand to interaction between the arts and on the other hand to the blurring of the boundaries of self-identity of nations, forming a common global art space.

For many centuries, China’s intercultural exchange with the world, and especially with the West, has influenced the development and formation of new directions in painting. Contemporary artists think globally and conceptually. They are concerned about social issues and in their projects they raise these issues. It is also important that despite external cultural influences, classical traditions and cultural backgrounds are reflected in contemporary Chinese painting.

Following the purpose of this study, we considered the parallels between the development of modern painting and enameling by analyzing works of painters Ding Yi, Huang Yuxing and Lam Tian Xing and enamellers Ah Xian and Shi Junyu. We also tried to understand how a ‘traditional’ Chinese approach can be successfully combined in one work with a ‘modern’ approach.

Contemporary artist Huang Yunning (黄宇兴) reconsiders the traditional landscape painting of China in his works. Modern materials used are acrylic paint and canvas, instead of ink and paper; a wide palette of bright instead of restrained colors; flatness and decorativeness instead of an aerial perspective, allowing the master to embody bold ideas in his works. While depicting the traditional genre of the Chinese art landscape, at the same time the artist’s paintings are also influenced by Western modernism. In particular, the artist paints in an open color in the style of Fauvism, uses chopped forms of Cubism and other modern stylistic devices. The lines resemble cloisonné partitions, separating colors and creating gradients. In *Enlightening* (2010) (Figure 1) and *Ore and Tree* (2019) lines model the shape, straight lines are combined with

smooth curves. The artist works with a wide range of colors and boldly applies them.



**Figure 1** Huang Yuxing (黄宇兴), *Enlightening*, 2016 – 2018, acrylic, canvas, 230 x 320 cm (Photo: open source).

An attempt to combine Eastern and Western traditions can be traced in the enamel work Ah Xian. He is an example of how an artist educated in the Chinese cultural context can preserve local traditions while interacting with the modern world, which is dominated by Western values. His works do not have an applied function; they are sculptures that are aimed at conveying the idea of the artist, a kind of combination of East and West. Ah Xian preserves the traditions of China in his choice of colors, motifs (dragons, birds, lotus flowers), technique (cloisonné enamel), combining them with the Western custom of realistic depiction of the human body.

An example is the sculptural work of Ah Xian (阿贤) *Human Human – Lotus* (Figure 2), which won the first prize of the National Gallery of Australia's inaugural National Sculpture prize in 2001 [13]. The life-length female figure is plastic in volume and completely covered on the outside with a delicate pattern of lotus flowers, broad leaves and long stems. Note that throughout its history, engaged mainly in agriculture, Chinese society has always focused on understanding nature and harmonious coexistence with it. Nature has always occupied a central place in the activities of the peoples of China and is considered a manifestation and transformation of the power of heaven through the generative interaction of the dualism of yin-yang (woman-man). Nature inspired the masters to depict moving and twisted shapes, such traditional ornaments as 'sky and algae', 'mountains and waters', 'flowers and birds', 'bamboo and plants', which are common motifs in painting [3].



**Figure 2** Ah Xian (阿贤), *Lotus* (*Human Human* series), 2000-2001, copper, enamel, 158 x 55.5 x 32cm, Queensland Art Gallery (Photo: open source).

It is worth noting the time-consuming technique used in the work of Ah Xian: cloisonné enamel. An analogue of the European term *cloisonné* (from the French *cloison*, ‘partition’), in China *jingtai doe* – 景泰. The first hieroglyph means the period of the emperor’s reign, and the latter one is translated as ‘blue’. It was during the reign of the Ming Dynasty of Emperor Jingtai (1450-1456) that the use of enamels with a blue background became widespread, after which his name became synonymous with this technique [10].

The term cloisonné defines the essence of the technological process, which is reduced to the following steps. Copper wire partitions are glued or soldered to flat or three-dimensional metal products. The space between the partitions is filled with enamel and fired at a temperature of 650 to 900 °C. The process of applying and firing the enamel is repeated until the holes are filled to the brim. Then the product is ground and re-fired to give the enamel shine. The partitioning metal is mostly gilded [6]. In particular in China the masters of the Ming period practiced the method of gilding, called *dujin* 鍍金 (‘gilding with fire’ using mercury amalgam), which has been known since ancient times and is still used to this day.

The scale of Lotus partitions attracts attention: unlike the background, which is covered with small filigree curls, the main elements of leaves and lotus are ten times bigger. Color stretches between the membranes from light green to indigo, from purple to white allow you to ‘revive’ the image, to convey volume. In traditional Chinese partition enamels, the membranes are less contrasting in size from each other and the holes between them are filled mainly with pigment of one local color. The desire to realistically convey the features of flora is inherent in the painted enamels (*hua fa-lan* 畫琺琅) from the Kangxi period, although technically they used rubbing and applied watercolor-like painting techniques on a white background [8].

It is worth noting the original technical experiments of Ah Xian: volume transfer in the technique of cloisonné enamel; combination of small partitions with large scale; work with a life-length copper figure, which poses technical difficulties in firing and uniform application of paint. The series of works of the artist consists of a large number of busts decorated with partition enamel with traditional Chinese motifs depicting nature and mythological creatures. A symbolic element in all sculptures are the ‘eyes’ of the models, which are closed. This gives his works a sense of inner peace, meditation, which rather strengthens than resists personal communication with the viewer [11]. In an interview with the artist, he noted that he has always been impressed by the shape of the human body and how it formed the central element of art for millennia, which is why the figure became the basis for exploring his expressive possibilities [13].

## 5.1 Painting Trends

On the above-described example of the work of Ah Xian *Lotus* we note that a narrative with the image of a lotus is one of the central symbols in Chinese painting, characterized by its imagery and unspoken meanings. Aesthetic ideals of the image of this flower are borrowed from Buddhism and Taoism and symbolize rebirth, purification, and purity [14].

The image of this flower has not lost its popularity to this day, although the artistic styles and techniques with which this symbol is represented vary. An example is the series of paintings *Lotus* by modern Chinese master Lam Tian Xing (林天行), also known as *Master of the Hall of Boundlessness* (Figure 3). Based on the traditional art of painting *Se-i* (写 – *se* – to write and 意 – *i* – idea), the author conveys the depicted image in a free expressive form. In the paintings, the light and shadow on the lotuses gently shape their three-dimensional perception. The silhouettes of light colors contrast with the dark

background, while the flow of pigments into each other create vibration of color.



**Figure 3** Lam Tian Xing (林天行), *Daybreak* (series *Lotus*), 2017, ink, paper, 45 x 53 cm (Photo: open source).

Shi Junyu (施君与) uses the same artistic techniques in his enamel works as Lam Tian Xing. The large-scale, spherical enameled wall work *Swim* (Figure 4) has much in common with the series of works *Lotus*. First of all, it is a painting technique applied in enamel. Drawing letters with enamel paint by means of a brush has been known since the 16th century and has been used by French artists (the famous ‘grizzly bear’ and Limoges enamel). Previously, to convey a narrative with figurative, anthropomorphic or floral motifs, multicolored enamels were placed next to each other, creating a single image of individual color spots of enamel. In the work *Swim* we can see the same painting techniques, but the enamel paint is no longer applied with a brush but is poured in much larger quantities. The enamel work departs from figurativeness and tends to abstraction, which is valid modern art as a whole, and uses strongly contrasting colors, a phenomenon that is quite common in today’s art. Thus, in *Swim*, the color blue is complemented by gold. This contrast was achieved by the artist through the use of transparent, translucent and muted opaque paints. The golden sheen was achieved by partially covering the copper sphere with transparent enamel (flux), which allowed to preserve the bright color of the metal.

Let us now dwell on the symbolism of the two most commonly used contrasting combinations in both painting and enameling. Blue (藍 – *lan*) is the color of the open space of the sea and sky and has long been used in traditional applied enamel works and in cobalt ornamental painting of the world-famous porcelain Qinghua (qīnghuācí) [9]. Yellow (黄 – *huang*), an symbol of the Earth, the



color of the emperor and the whole of China [5]. The combination of yellow (gold) and blue in the works of artists is a symbolic combination of earth and sky, feminine and masculine. This color symbiosis appears throughout the work of Shi Junyu.



**Figure 4** Shi Junyu (施君与), *Swim*, 2018, wall enamel installation, diameter 1 m (Photo: open source).

## 5.2 Technical and Technological Capabilities and Discoveries

The creative heritage of Chinese enameller Shi Junyu deserves considerable attention. Founder and chief designer of Handed Down Enamel, an artist who rethinks the scope of hot enamel, its place and role in contemporary art. According to Shi Junyu, traditional enamel can be successfully combined with art of today, actively implemented in design and, thanks to technological innovations, re-enter the lives of modern people in a new manifestation [15]. Of course, the expressive potential of hot enamel has still not been fully disclosed. However, at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, artists – painters, designers, graphic artists, sculptors and artists of decorative and applied arts – began to return to ancient techniques. After all, this gives the opportunity to combine in one work different approaches and aesthetic visions: free imagination and refined craft, free plasticity and decorative completeness. In the implementation of their creative ideas artists are attracted by the following possibilities of enamel:

1. Universality: in enamel it is possible to create graphic, picturesque, sculptural works.
2. Unexpected results: the unpredictability of the final result gives endless opportunities for variations and experiments (temperature, firing time, paint components).
3. Polychromy: change of perception under different angles of illumination depending on the use of transparent, translucent and opaque enamels.

4. Durability: from the analysis of historical experience, it is noticeable that the ancient Greek and ancient Egyptian enamels have not lost either their color or luster [16].

In addition to durability, enamel also has protective, anti-corrosion properties, is resistant not only to atmospheric influences but also to the action of chemical reagents [7]. The new simplified process of its production makes it possible to create large planes. This, as well as the wide expressive decorative possibilities of enamel opened the way to its use as a form of monumental art in architecture, as part of the interior and exterior, contributed to the emergence of large-scale art objects and installations.

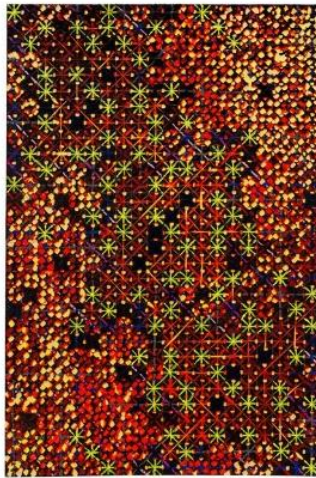
Realizing the benefits of hot enamel, Shi Junyu in 2010 began to create enamel furniture. This is a new category in enameling, which combines the artistic component of a work of art with a purely applied use function, which creates a dissonance between art and its exploitation. Using the traditional technique of enameling, at the same time the work of enameling flows into everyday life and the interior, which contrasts sharply with the attitude to art in past centuries.

Exploring the possibilities of enamel in space, Shi Junyu in 2015 created the enamel work *Reincarnation*, which has an area of over 480 m<sup>2</sup> and is listed in the Guinness Book of Records as the largest enamel work in the world. It is located in the Baoku Art Center on the 37th floor of the Shanghai Tower. The idea and design of the work is inspired by an understanding of the structure of the universe. The blue starry sky and the fish totem, which are common to all ethnic groups, formed the basis for modeling the shape of a fish with a copper vein against a local background. 1400 pieces of enamel were harmoniously combined into one single work. The rich color of the sky with a copper line that changes and transforms on the surface has analogies with the calligraphic symbolism of the line in Chinese art and the minimalism of the use of local color in modern painting.

After experimenting with furniture and floors, Shi Junyu moved to enameled curtain walls, large-size installations and frescoes, to create an interior in which everything down to the details, such as the door handles, is made with a single technique of combining metal with glass mass. Possibilities of hot enamel as a material and technique of execution have been widely used by the artist for the embodiment of creative ideas, representation of picturesque forms for representation in art space.

### 5.3 Abstract Variations

Among the artists who represent contemporary Chinese painting, the artist Ding Yi (丁乙), who works with abstractions and linear forms, stands out. He creates clear linear works of a matrix type, allegorically referring to the modern world order. The artist reflects on the theme of ultra-rapid industrialization and urban development in China and, imitating the aesthetics of mechanical design, reproduces complex visual effects (Figure 5). Following his own concept, Ding Yi departs from painting and applies optical illusions. The lines and dots gathered into one meaningful idea send the viewer to stereo images, looking into which, you can see another image, a hidden one.



**Figure 5** Ding Yi (丁乙), *Appearance of Crosses 2020-C6*, 2020, mixed media on basswood, 45 x 30 cm (Photo: open source).

The enamel sculpture by Shi Junyu *Ocean Star* (Figure 6) is similar in formal components. Like the thousands of dots and lines of Ding Yi, Shi Junyu's enamel uses a significant amount of metal parts to form the final image of the sculpture. The work with a diameter of 2 m and an area of 4.37 m<sup>2</sup> contains 3785 elements. The combination of small elements to create a large work of art is a form of expression inherent in the artistic pursuits of today's artists. Only at a distance you can understand and appreciate the scale of the presented work, because up close it looks purely abstract. By analogy with stereo images, in these works the content is hidden behind the form. Of course, contemporary art is aimed at dialogue and the search for the audience's own interpretations of the content of the presented work. However, the 'idea' does not always lie on the surface, so after your own reflections on the work of art and acquaintance with

the concept laid down by the artist, you can understand the laid combination of ‘internal’ and ‘external’; ‘content’ and ‘forms of embodiment’ [17]. Thus, the sphere itself is an embodiment of the image of the earth and the cycles in nature, and the picturesque enameled plates of fish-shaped eyes of different shapes give the impression of a natural matrix and total contemplation.



**Figure 6** Shi Junyu (施君与), *Ocean Star*, 2019, copper, enamel, diameter 2 m, Shan Hai Jing (Photo: open source).

## 6 Conclusions

Metaphysical Taoist contemplation and admiration for nature formed the basis of traditional Chinese painting, where, in contrast to the European anthropocentric and anthropomorphic approach, the dominant place has always belonged to images of nature. At the same time, one of the key trends in contemporary Chinese painting is a focus on globalization. In today’s art, artists complement centuries-old traditions with conceptual ideas and the use of modern materials. As a result of this synergy, a new fine art was born.

Analyzing the works of Chinese painters Ding Yi, Huang Yuxing, Lam Tian Xing and enamellers Ah Xian and Shi Junyu, we can trace the parallels of the development of these two components of art (painting and enamel art). Despite the emergence of new artistic forms of expression – in particular the chromatic experiments with oil paint and acrylic on canvas, and sculpture and monumental art in enamel – Chinese artists manage to combine traditional with modern trends. The currents of the twentieth century and art schools of European countries have expanded the tools and color palette and contributed to the determination and courage in the creative experiments of artists. The traditional attention to emptiness, initiated by the Taoist school, is today complemented by attention to light and shadow. In particular, the relationship of rich local color

with calligraphic lines, the combination of traditional techniques and a narrative with Western ideological components.

The period in which today's art and culture has entered can be called a milestone in terms of reassessment and search for prospects or ways into the future. It is possible that enamel belongs to one of the new, undiscovered facets of creativity of the third millennium. According to some art critics, enamel occupies the first place in contemporary art because it allows you to combine modern styles with different techniques, materials and the latest creative views.

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