

Research on Zhou Sicong's Artistic Journey and Ink Techniques

Hening Gong^{1*†}, Shutong Zhang^{1†}

¹Northeast Normal University, Changchun, China

*Corresponding Author. Email: gonghening2004@qq.com

†These authors contributed equally to this work and should be considered as co-first author.

Abstract: Zhou Sicong is a distinguished female artist in the history of contemporary Chinese fine arts, renowned for her profound humanistic concern and distinctive stylistic techniques. Focusing on the core stages of Zhou's early, middle, and later artistic periods and her mastery of ink techniques, this paper systematically traces the evolution of her artistic style—from realism, to expressionism, and finally to lyricism—through an analysis of her representative works. By combining theoretical study with practical analysis, this research reveals the deep integration of technique and emotion in Zhou's art. Her work not only holds significant artistic value but also embodies profound reflections on life, offering critical insights into the modern transformation of Chinese ink painting.

Keywords: Zhou Sicong, Ink Techniques, Realism and Expression, *The Miners*

1. Introduction

Within the long continuum of contemporary Chinese art history, Zhou Sicong occupies an irreplaceable position through her outstanding artistic achievements and profound humanistic spirit. The sense of oppression and sorrow conveyed in her works is a reflection of her compassionate heart, characterized by her ability to "empathize with the suffering and sympathize with all living beings." Possessing a keen artistic sensitivity, Zhou captured the hardships and struggles of her time and people, transforming these emotions into visual form through her brushwork, endowing her works with a deeply moving power.

This compassion, emanating from within, coupled with her profound insight into the world, elevated Zhou's art beyond mere technical prowess to a realm of higher artistic temperament. As art critic Lang Shaojun once remarked, "One of the defining characteristics of Zhou Sicong's works is their elevated tone... especially in her works following *The Miners*. Their simple yet pure spirit mirrors her integrity, sincerity, and unpretentious character; her noble demeanor sustains her noble character" [1].

2. Zhou Sicong's life and artistic journey

Zhou Sicong was born in 1939 in Hebei Province, China. Passionate about art from a young age, she pursued rigorous training during her secondary education and was later admitted to the Chinese Painting Department of the Central Academy of Fine Arts. In 1964, she met Mr. Lu Chen, with whom

she formed a lifelong partnership. Zhou Sicong passed away in 1996 at the age of 57 at Beijing Ditan Hospital due to acute necrotizing pancreatitis [2].

Commenting on Zhou Sicong's painting style, Lu Chen remarked: "Sicong's artistic journey can broadly be divided into three stages: realism, expressionism, and lyricism" [3].

In her early works, Zhou was influenced by the "Xu-Jiang School", where both her brushwork and forms absorbed principles of Western realism, advocating for the integration of scientific elements into Chinese ink figure painting [4]. In her middle period, influenced by artists such as Käthe Kollwitz and the Maruki couple, her works began to depict the tragic fate and hardships of the lower classes under harsh realities, often using exaggerated and distorted forms. Later, due to illness, her creative focus shifted toward smaller-scale works, covering themes such as lotus flowers and landscapes, with her "Lotus" series being the most representative.

3. Artistic creation during the realist period

After the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, Chinese art took on a new direction. Zhou Sicong's works during this period were marked by distinct characteristics of the era, favoring depictions of grassroots laborers. Her early creations, deeply influenced by her mentor Jiang Zhaohe, featured vivid and saturated colors, a strong emphasis on sketching from life, and a tendency toward realism. For instance, her work *The People and the Premier* was created to commemorate Premier Zhou Enlai, drawing on scenes from significant events during his lifetime. The painting portrays Premier Zhou comforting earthquake victims in Hebei following the 1966 disaster [5], exhibiting strong emotional impact. Employing a realist approach based on structural sketching, Zhou used center-tip brush techniques to delineate lines, skillfully combining lines and surfaces. Her brushwork was light, brisk, and imbued with a sense of calligraphic fluidity, preserving the traditional quality of Chinese line drawing with variations in thickness and speed. Strong contrasts of ink tones on the figures' faces highlight the emotional gravity, while the use of dry brush and fluid strokes to differentiate the clothing of the disaster victims and the Premier strengthens their identity contrast, vividly portraying the collective image of the people alongside the Premier.

4. Artistic creation during the expressive period

During a prolonged period of exploration, Zhou Sicong and Lu Chen collaborated to create five distinctive works for the *Miners* series. This series narrates the history of Chinese miners in Northeast China during World War II, depicting their struggles, resistance, and ultimate triumph [6].

In this phase, Zhou moved beyond traditional realist line drawing, using simplified and vigorous lines to outline figures, and exaggerating and distorting forms to intensify emotional expression. While maintaining basic structural accuracy, she symbolized and distilled the human figure into upright geometric lines, presenting a rough exterior that encapsulated immense inner strength, thus enhancing the expressive power of the paintings. Through the magnification of features, abstraction of forms, and use of distortion to evoke a sense of oppression, Zhou conveyed her abhorrence for war and deep concern for the common people. In treating the clothing folds, her lines followed the body's contours, reinforced by large ink masses to accentuate volume and light-shadow relationships. Merging realism with freehand brushwork, her lines were slow and weighty, striving for a coarse and rugged texture. The use of dry-brush techniques further enriched the textural and dynamic qualities of her work. Layers of rich ink, large patches of charred and heavy ink, were employed to construct spatial depth, emphasizing the heaviness of the subjects. The strong black-and-white contrasts and distorted limbs created a powerful sense of suppression and impact, with the intense contrast between dry-brush-outlined faces and ink-washed backgrounds heightening the emotional resonance.

5. Artistic creation during the lyrical period

In the later stages of Zhou Sicong's artistic development, influenced by her deteriorating health, she gradually shifted her focus to small-scale compositions.

Building upon her extensive experience in figure painting, Zhou integrated recollections and a sense of melancholy into her later works, crafting a serene and aesthetically enchanting world of lotus flowers. These pieces reflect an introspective and poetic dimension, blending personal emotion with artistic imagery to create a tranquil yet emotionally rich atmosphere.

6. Conclusion

Zhou Sicong's artistic journey exemplifies the symbiotic evolution of technique and spirit. To inherit and further develop her artistic legacy, two core principles must be grasped. On the technical level, it is essential to ensure a profound alignment between technique and content, using personal emotional experience as a bridge. Through deep understanding of the cultural underpinnings of technique, artists should aim for the coherent and expressive articulation of technical language. On the level of stylistic innovation, it is necessary to ground creative transformation in one's unique artistic characteristics. True inheritance lies in the exploration of humanistic concern. By deconstructing and reconstructing techniques, artists can seek breakthroughs within the dynamic tension between traditional cultural lineage and individual expression, ultimately achieving a dual transcendence—from technical inheritance to the advancement of aesthetic consciousness.

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