

Points of Departure and Lines of Comparison – The Recent Works of Qiu Zhenzhong

Qiu Zhenzhong, a Professor at the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing, is well known for his expertise in calligraphy, cultural studies, linguistics and poetry. Qiu, who graduated with a master's degree in calligraphy from the China Academy of Fine Arts in Hangzhou (formerly called the Zhejiang Fine Arts Institute), believes that the value of calligraphy lies in its lines instead of characters, and he is committed to finding ways for calligraphy to play an important role in contemporary art. His 1988 series "Characters to be Deciphered" was a watershed in expressing these views. Based on unrecognized characters from bronze vessels from the Shang and Zhou dynasties, the series reached back into China's ancient past. The series acknowledged man's ever-present desire and need to communicate, while focusing on lines. Because these characters themselves are unreadable, the brushstrokes become paramount and their interplay of lines convey the many nuances of which the brush is capable, including tempo and pressure.

According to Qiu, traditional calligraphy focuses on the "art of characters" while modern calligraphy focuses on the "art of lines". His most recent work, however, seems to eschew calligraphy altogether and instead concentrates on ink paintings of figures and still-lives. His sources of inspiration may at first glance seem disparate: the paintings of Matisse and the woodblock prints depicting the well-known Chinese tale "Romance of the West Chamber". Underpinning both, however, is the "art of lines". It is with open-mindedness and a desire to transform both the paintings of Matisse and Chinese woodblock prints into contemporary Chinese ink painting that Qiu begins.

In giving this short essay the title "Points of Departure and Lines of Comparison", calligraphy remains at the forefront. By substituting the word "points" by "dots", and by combining it with the word "lines" we are at the heart of calligraphy and Chinese painting. Qiu's renditions of Matisse and woodblock prints incorporate both dots and lines brushed in ink. In his essay for the catalogue of the recently opened exhibition "Out of Character – Decoding Chinese Calligraphy" at the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, Michael Knight recalls the words of Sun Guoting (648-703), "You must understand the use of dots and lines and make a broad study of the historical developments of characters".*

As an accomplished modern calligrapher, Qiu Zhenzhong has studied the development of characters for most of his life. In focusing on Matisse and woodblock prints, he aims to use his brush to understand every detail of these masterpieces – their techniques and essence.

Henri Matisse (1869-1954) was a source of profound inspiration for leading 20th century Chinese artists, particularly those who lived in Paris. Matisse, a leading light of the Fauve movement, was a supreme colorist who was also deeply interested in the importance of line. Of 20th century Chinese painters inspired by him, Sanyu (Chang Yu, 1901-1966) and Lin Fengmian (1900-1991) come quickly to mind, but there are others as well. Sanyu's work, particularly his sketches of nudes in ink and charcoal on paper, afford the best comparison with Qiu Zhenzhong's recent paintings. Sanyu painted and drew in a succinct and elegant manner, always striving to reach the essence of the matter. He was emboldened by his gasp of linearity, in which he had been trained in by his years of studying Chinese calligraphy and painting. On arrival in Europe, Sanyu's repertoire expanded so that he used pencil, charcoal, and oil, in addition to his native ink.

Qiu Zhenzhong has transposed some of Matisse's richly colored oil on canvas paintings in the collection of Pompidou Centre into large-scale ink on paper paintings (Matisse First Suite, 2012) and smaller-scale studies (Study, 2012). One study, for example, is based on Matisse's 1925 "Nu assis sur fond rouge". The original, of a female nude seated on a red-and-yellow striped chair, has a deep and powerful red background. In Qiu's study, Matisse's lines are further simplified and the palette is reduced to tones of grey. The background is the blank xuan paper. The female nude predominates. It is brushed on paper in shades of greys darker than the chair, which is depicted in lighter toned stripes.

On the question of color, Matisse himself noted that an artist "must draw first to cultivate the spirit and that it is only after years of preparation that the young artist should touch color. . ."

* In other words, color should not become a distraction. This view is similar to the precepts of traditional Chinese brush-and-ink painting, in which color and color washes are secondary to well executed lines and dots. To reach the absolute essence of a subject, Matisse recognized the importance of line. In her audio commentary of "The Dance -1", MoMa curator Ann Temkin notes "In 1908, the year before he made this painting, Matisse was quoted as saying, 'Suppose I want to paint a woman's body. First of all, I imbue it with grace and charm, but I know that I must give something more. I will condense the meaning of this body by seeking its essential lines. The charm will be less apparent at first glance, but it must eventually emerge from the new image, which will have a broader meaning, one more fully human.'"*

One of Qiu's small ink studies is based on Matisse's monumental "The Dance", which was painted in two versions: "The Dance - 1" (1909) and "The Dance - 2" (1910) – the former being a preliminary version of the latter. In both, Matisse simplified the human body, eliminating the unessential, to create an image of energetic joy signified in the five nude figures who dance in a circle. Qiu's small-scale study concentrates solely on the two figures at the far left of the original. With unbroken lines brushed in ink, the arms of the dancer in the foreground become elongated. The left side of the dancer's torso and her raised and outstretched arm is one long, confident line. Dotting is the other component Qiu introduces in his Matisse renditions. They are most apparent in the large scale suites in which textiles and still-lives are enriched by diffused dots in wet ink.

After his return to China from two months in Paris and an immersion in the appreciation of the ten or so representative Matisse works in the Pompidou, Qiu Zhenzhong turned his attention to the Ming-dynasty woodblock print version of the well-known Chinese literary classic "Romance of the West Chamber".

Printing is one of China's greatest achievements, and has had a continuous development of over one thousand years. Qiu's transformation of the printed line to a brushed lined is an intriguing act of deconstruction, but it goes further than that. His un-inscribed paintings are devoid of text. Relying entirely on the nuances of the brush to create human figures, their gestures and their surroundings, the paintings eliminate the textual descriptions that are found in the original prints. As early as the 8th century, prints were mass produced in China by pressing paper onto the inked surface of a wooden block carved with text and illustration or both. Initially single color prints were produced, followed by multi-color ones. The world's earliest dated printed book is Chinese. The 868 CE "Diamond Sutra", a long horizontal scroll, is now in the collection of the British Library in London.* It opens with an illustrated frontispiece showing the Buddha and his elderly disciple Subhuti as well as other members of the Buddha's retinue. This is followed by the sacred text. The "Diamond Sutra" was amongst a cache of documents found by the explorer Sir Aurel Stein in the Dunhuang caves, in China's north-west.

Qiu Zhenzhong has taken illustrations from the "Romance of the West Chamber" (Xixiangji)* as a point of departure, using the Hongzhi period (1487-1505) printed version of this immensely popular love story as a source of inspiration. Dated 1498, this version is the

earliest and most complete printed edition of the drama. Like the Diamond Sutra, it is a document combining illustrations and text. In *The Romance of the West Chamber*, illustrations at the top of the pages portray the scenes described in the text below. During the Ming dynasty (1368-1644) vernacular literature was widely disseminated by woodblock printed texts. In addition to the 1498 version, the “Romance of West Chamber” was illustrated by well-known artists such as Chen Hongshou (1599-1651) who contributed to a 1639 version.

The Yuan dynasty playwright Wang Shifu (c. 1260-1336) based the “Romance of the West Chamber” on the Tang dynasty prose romance “The Story of Yingying”. Wang deftly characterized the main dramatis personae. Scholar Zhang, Widow Cui, her daughter Yingying with whom Zhang falls in love, and the memorable maidservant, Hongniang, who allies herself with the young lovers, provide ample material for contemporary, expressive brush-and-ink interpretations. The consummated, clandestine love affair between Scholar Zhang and Yingying provides moments of heightened emotions as well as near-comedic elements, while the presence of bandits and other malcontents injects moments of danger.

Popular scenes from the “Romance of the West Chamber” have been interpreted innumerable times in Chinese art and in many materials, including ceramics and carvings. Qiu’s Chinese ink paintings interpretations come in two formats: large-scale ink on xuan paper paintings called “Suites” created in 2008, and smaller scale “studies”, also in ink on xuan paper, painted in 2012. In the large-scale paintings, the close relationship between Yingying and her maidservant, Hongniang, can be observed primarily through their body language. Hongniang is often solicitous and although Qiu makes use of their relative sizes to indicate their roles, their postures and gestures are more revealing. The elaborate backgrounds of Yingying’s bedchamber or of architectural settings are brushed in ink lighter in tone than the figural depictions, human emphasis to the human elements of the story.

The first step in creating woodblock prints is to brush or draw pictures and/or texts on a piece of paper. The paper is dampened and placed face down on block of wood and then blank areas are carved out, leaving the linear design in relief. When ink is applied on the woodblock and a sheet of paper pressed down on it, a print is created. A precisely carved image or character can be as crisp as the chisel is sharp. Qiu Zhenzhong’s “Romance of the West Chamber” paintings, on the other hand, have many more diffused, blurred and softened lines than the original woodblock print, bringing an overall romance to the depictions. It is not possible to confuse them with the originals, and the large scale of the “Suites” also means they could never be mistaken for the original woodblock prints.

Qiu knows well the implications of “copying”(linmo 臨摹). As a highly trained calligrapher, he has learnt practical brush-and-ink skills by making replicas of works by past masters, and as he writes in his exhibition introduction, his motivation for approaching the paintings of Matisse and the prints of “Romance of the West Chamber” are with linmo in mind. In China, linmo is an accepted pedagogical approach that is both endorsed and encouraged. The Chinese-language vocabulary for “copying”, however, is much more nuanced than the English-language counterpart.

First and foremost, Qiu views his paintings as conceptual pieces. Traditional approaches to linmo generally pair the model or masterpiece with an artist using the same materials (brush, ink, pigments and paper) and methods as the original. Qiu, however, has departed dramatically from the originals that have inspired him, especially when he emulates Matisse. In his hands, Matisse’s oils on canvases have become ink on paper, and the “Romance of the West Chamber” prints created from carved blocks of wood have become freely interpreted brushed ink on paper. In the Chinese tradition, an inspired and well-executed linmo version of a masterpiece is considered a masterpiece in its own right. The artist’s and mental

process in understanding, absorbing and emulating the original makes it so. The required technical skills must be present, but, most importantly, heightened creativity is a critical and essential part of the process. “Imitating” works in the style of a master (fang) and “copying or emulating” works of a master (linmo) are highly regarded practices. For Qiu Zhenzhong, with his dedication to line and his fascination with its use, the works of Matisse and the woodblock prints of the “Romance of the West Chamber” are starting points for the contemporary transformation he seeks.

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Notes:

*Hans Herman Frankel, introduction, translation and commentary, *Two Chinese Treatises on Calligraphy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), p. 14 quoted in Michael Knight “Introduction: Decoding Chinese Calligraphy”, *Out of Character – Decoding Chinese Calligraphy* (San Francisco: Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, 2012), p. 21

*“Henri Matisse letter to Henry Clifford, Vence, 14 February 1948” in Herschel B. Chipp, *Theories of Modern Art* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press: 1968), pp 140-41, quoted in Rita Wong’s essay “Sanyu – a Short Biography” which is available online at <http://www.asianart.com/exhibitions/sanyu/wong.html>

*The transcribed audio program excerpt is found at http://www.moma.org/collection/browse_results.php?criteria=O%3AAD%3AE%3A3832&page_number=46&template_id=1&sort_order=1 The Matisse holdings at MoMa also include a number of the artist’s figure drawings which demonstrate his mastery of line.

* For descriptions of the text’s history, creation and conservation, see *The Diamond Sutra: The Story of the World’s Earliest Dated Printed Book* (London: The British Library, 2010) by Frances Wood, head of the British Library’s Chinese section, and Mark Barnard, the manager of the Conservation section, who was responsible for the sutra’s seven-year conservation treatment.

*The Chinese text of the drama can be found at online at the Gutenberg site <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/23906> and an English language version is edited and translated with an introduction by Stephen H. West and Wilt L. Idema *The Moon and the Zither-The Story of the Western Wing* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).