

# Spatial Characteristics of Chu Teh-chun's Abstract Paintings

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**Abstract**—This paper studies the unique spatial style characteristics of Chu Teh-chun's abstract paintings, and summarizes his paintings into four points: the sense of light and shadow and the principles of yin and yang, centrality and multidimensional principal-subordinate relation, metaphor and abstract landscape, integration and infinite universe. Through the summarization and analysis on those spatial characteristics, this paper reflects artists' follow-up and transcendence of the spirit of the times, the exploration and innovation of Chinese and Western art traditions, and their thinking and discovery of the essence of art in the process of exploring their respective artistic style.

**Keywords**—Chu Teh-chun; abstract painting; space

## I. INTRODUCTION

Abstract painting is a major genre of Western modernism painting, and it is still in the ascendant to this day. Painting is a formative art presented by planes, and its space is basically static and illusory. The distinguishing feature of abstract painting is that there is no more identifiable concrete image on the picture. Its space is both a means of expression and a subject of the expression. Therefore, spatial processing occupies a very important position in the formal language of abstract painting.

Chu Teh-chun is the first Chinese academician of the Faculty of Fine Arts of the L'Institut de France, and is a world-renowned master of abstract painting. He graduated from Hangzhou Art College in his early years. In 1955, he went to France to pursue artistic ideals. Influenced by Nicolas de Stael, he transferred to creation of abstract painting. At this time, Europe was right in the prosperous development period of "atypical" art; Chu Teh-chun was soon regarded as an important member of the school of Paris. After the 1960s, he regained Chinese calligraphy and ink painting, drew nutrition from the deep tradition of Chinese culture, and gradually formed his unique painting style with distinctive Chinese artistic conception. His mature works look magnificent, with vivid light and shadow rhythm, perfectly combine the delicateness of oriental ink painting and the flamboyant nature of Western oil painting, and get the spirit of Chinese traditional painting integrated with the form of Western abstract painting.

What are the unique characteristics in the spatial processing of Chu Teh-chun's abstract paintings? How did he

gradually discover his unique style in art practice? This paper studies and summarizes those concerns in details.

## II. THE SENSE OF LIGHT AND SHADOW AND THE PRINCIPLES OF YIN AND YANG

The most important sign that Chu Teh-chun's abstract painting space is different from others is that the picture is full of the shining sense of "light". The background of his works mostly adopts dark tones; the central area of the vision is in bright color, and the hue mostly adopts a color contrasting with the background color, so that the picture forms a surrounding form, namely bright color is surrounded by heavy colors. This surrounding manner plays an important role in expressing the sense of light. The brighter color covers the extension part of the dark background, creating a sense of flickering after shining of light; the elliptical dots on the base of the bright part are like condensed gems, and the slender lines interspersed into them, forming a rhythm of dredging. Light twists and changes in the structure of the picture, forming into refraction effect of light source; it seems that the light flows silently in the structure of the picture, giving viewer a feeling of sneaking into the memory of their mages of everything along with the change of light. In order to make the picture lively, Chu Teh-chun retains the traces left by putting pen to paper instantly. The diluted oil blooms in the dark color, forming rich variations, which makes the dark part full of hidden vitality. The structural lines are looming in the pen marks and extend beyond the background. He discovered the various possibilities of light application, and constructed a wonderful multi-dimensional space on the picture through the processing of light effect. The specially created lights give the picture a strong sense of life, create a fascinating charm, bringing out a stage-like spotlight effect, and also make people remind the strange mysterious brilliance shining in the universe, like chaos, the moment when heaven was separated from earth, the mysterious scene of the birth of life.

French critic Pierre Cabanne pointed out that "light" is an important performance element in Chu Teh-chun's works, and his works are often named after light, such as "Traces of Light (光的痕迹)", "Grabbed Light (掠取之光)", "Before Light (光线之前)", "The Edge Light (边缘之光)", "Distant Light (远方之光)", "The Crossing of Light (光的穿越)", "The Light Reflected from a Distance (映射自远方的光)" and so on. Cabanne believed that Chu Teh-chun's work is an open space

where all possible elements collide and create associations. Light and reflection are shattered in the painting, becoming intensely dazzling, and the splendid brilliance shines in the vague shadows, inspiring a variety of intense emotional expressions. The lyricism of light in his painting comes from the revelation of the various elements in the universe that are freely inter-infiltrated and ever-changing. [1] Gao Tianmin said that the "light" in Chu Teh-chun's works is not only the form and composition in the picture, but also the content he wants to express. As a light source that determines the brightness and darkness, it affects the color and structure of the picture, and also creates the artistic conception of the picture through intersected chromatic halos. "Light" scattered from the "light source" and spread to every corner of the picture, so that the world can gain vitality in the complement of "yin" and "yang". At the same time, those "lights" have created space in a way of leaving blank. It released the imagination in "empty nothing" and gave birth to "being" in "nothing". [2]

In his inaugural speech for serving as academician in 1999, Chu Teh-chun expounded his understanding of "light". He said that he created the image of cosmic phenomena in combination with two complementary and most basic elements "yin" and "yang" to convey the philosophy in the Book of Changes. [3] Here, the "yang" refers to light, and "yin" refers to shadow. He transformed the relationship between yin and yang of Taoism into the relationship between light and shadow in Western painting, to express the cosmic phenomenon in which binary factors are infinitely multiplied and further trace the roots of Chinese traditional aesthetics through the philosophy in the Book of Changes and the theory of "yin and yang". He used the warmth and darkness of color to create light source. Light as the center of a unified picture provides a common foundation for other form elements. This is the inner light produced by a picture, and also the "light of art" that has been processed and sublimated by the artist. Chu Teh-chun said that his "light" came from the influence of Rembrandt. The use of light in many of his works had the solemnity and sacredness of Western classical paintings; but the light in Rembrandt's picture was related to the doctrines of Christianity and was a dramatic light controlled by the painter and having the nature of light source. Chu Teh-chun said that he had no religious beliefs, and the light in his painting is "the light of this soul". The light combining yin and yang makes his works full of agile vitality. French critic Lanbert praised that "His paintings show the poetic meditation on the world. This is a vibrant, ever-changing and infinite space with life that appears in every painting. [4]

On the other hand, Chu Teh-chun's "light" is also related to the impressionism, just like the "feeling of a moment in the universe" as said by Wu Dayu when inspiring him in that year. The impressionist paintings' depiction on light and shadow appeared in Europe in the 19th century reached the extreme. In order to express the instantaneous change of light, Monet carried more than a dozen of canvases when he went out to sketch, and changed canvas every tens of minutes. His famous series of painting such as "Haystacks" and "Water Lily" accurately present the delicate changes of light, and

light becomes the theme of his works. Desroches, director of Guimet Art Museum in Paris, talked about the role of light in Chu Teh-chun's paintings: "Through his painting, viewer can enter an empire of light; Chu Teh-chun uses his brush to subtly extract lights from chaos. Those paintings no longer seek the beauty of the world, but transform to seek the song of the universe, with its clamor, tremors and breath. Chu Teh-chun seems to leave the nature, but in fact it is returning to the deep place between heaven and earth. He seems to be confused by the search for light, and tries to tame it. It is this light and the proficient control on it that opens the door to him infinitely. Chu Teh-chun was conquered by the new possibilities of light. He changed the relationship between painter and the universe and paved an unforeseen bridge of time in the Western world. [5]

### III. CENTRALITY AND MULTIDIMENSIONAL PRINCIPAL-SUBORDINATE RELATION

The space of Chu Teh-chun's abstract works in mature period also has a basically similar common feature: the picture is formed by variation and arrangement of several "faces" from large to small ones. The largest block of face on the picture determines the overall composition and the relationship between the light and dark of the picture. The medium-sized faces play the role of connection and transition between large faces. The smallest face is concentrated in the center bright area and gradually narrows to a small point. The visual focus is gathered to form the principal-subordinate relation on the picture. The soft and slender curve around the central point both break the monotony of the "face" and forms a mass transition between the medium-sized "face" and the point. The curvature of lines forms an echo relationship with the edge line of the large ink stain of brush stroke in the background, so that the large, medium, and small relationships in the picture can be connected smoothly.

Hong Kong critic Lin Niantong believes that the law of this composition comes from the "principal-subordinate law" of Western art, and is an important link that connects Chu Teh-chun's abstract paintings to modern Western paintings. In the 19th century, a German experimental aesthetician Lipps believed that the law of consistency, the one-multiple law and the principal-subordinate law are three major laws governing the formal characteristics of all Western aesthetic objects. According to Lipps's explanation, the so-called principal law is that there is a "single" prominent part in a painting which dominates and hangs over the entire artistic body. This prominent part was expressed in perspective method during the Renaissance. In Chu Teh-chun's paintings, the principal-subordinate law was characterized by the "central tendency". [6] This form always appears in Chu Teh-chun's works, and has become the law governing the form composition of his work. The dark background leads the line of sight to the bright center of the picture, and the part between the two parts is the intermediate tone that connects them together.

Through the observation and summarization on more works of Chu Teh-chun, it can also be seen that there are more than one bright color areas in many of his works. In

addition to the main center, there are also a number of associated centers corresponding to it, thus forms a rich and varied principal-subordinate law, increases the complexity and viewing interest of the picture, and avoids the monotony and similarity between his works. Maurice Panier said: "Chu Teh-chun's space is not a classical perspective, but can be called a multi-dimensional space. The ingenious selection of colors and the layout of small squares in the paintings create a subtle change of light crossing. Painting is space and structure". [3] Fan Di'an believes that this multi-dimensional space is like the cosmic symbiosis space in Chinese traditional philosophy, and compares it to the montage effect: "His mind seems to be full of chaotic unopened cosmic illusions, splits and superimposes objects with regular shapes, and make them flow freely, form rhythmic color blocks and lines, make the edges blurred till disappearing to further form into a montage effect as shown in films, namely you cannot see the link between objects but they seem to coexist in the same place; this is the originally comprehensive scene of the universe. The fast-projecting light pulse creates an illusion of flow, like the time segment captured by high-speed photography that can get the infinite time frozen in an eternal moment, break the equilibrium of time and the finiteness of space, and further create a continuous dream until the end of time is like the poetic poetry flowing in the symphony, and also like the abundant poetic conception flown in symphony that both gives people a psychedelic appearance and makes people feel the joy of life. [7]

Western painters discovered the perspective of intersection in the scientific method of materialism, and made an objective and true recognition on the space actually existing in the nature. The nature depicted by them presents a real feeling of illusory three-dimensional space constructed in a two-dimensional plane space. The invention of photography deprived the function of realism and illusion making in western paintings; hence, Western modern paintings moved toward a planar trend. The painter also gained greater freedom and subjectivity in dealing with space form. Chinese painting has such a set of visual principles as constructed on the basis of idealism, called cavalier perspective; with respect to the concept of space, Chinese painting has its own interpretation, namely there are more than one intersections in the picture; the specific number of intersections depends on the artist's intention. Chinese painting expresses infinite space in a limited picture. It not only expresses the immediate scene, but also pays more attention to the scene in heart. It is a spiritual space full of poetry and feeling. Cézanne broke the intersection perspective in Western traditions and influenced the development of whole Western modern paintings. The observation method he used was actually to create a new multi-dimensional space by moving the viewpoint; the principle is consistent with the cavalier perspective in Chinese paintings. Chu Teh-chun is proficient in both of the said two skills. He also used this method in his own abstract paintings to organize the space with multi-dimensional changes according to the needs of the picture, to lead the viewer's eyes to flow with the structure of his design and tour in multiple spaces created in the picture.

#### IV. METAPHOR AND ABSTRACT LANDSCAPE

When making in-depth observation, it can also be found that the relationship between large, medium and small faces shown in Chu Teh-chun's abstract works can be extended to the transformation of relations between large faces such as mountains and lakes, medium-sized faces such as hills and stones, and small faces such as trees, flowers and plants in Chinese landscape paintings. Lin Niantong believes that this feature comes from the general function of the tradition of Chinese landscape paintings. "The principal-subordinate relation in Chinese painting is similar to principal-subordinate law in Western painting. Painter often abandons the individual landscapes, simplifies the concrete image, abstract and presents them with hints. The purpose is to 'abandon the small similarity and acquire the large similarity, abandon the shape and show its spirit.'" [6]

In "The Spiritual System of Chinese Paintings (中国绘画精神体系)", scholar Jiang Chengqing pointed out that "the composition of Chinese traditional painting is called the 'position processing', which is the fifth of Sheikh's 'theory of six principles of painting'. The main theme under discussion is the distribution of space on paper. In the West, the concept of space is purely a matter of orientation. The source of beauty sought in ancient Chinese composition principles is 'profound theory (玄理)', and a question of how to get tangible objects arranged on white paper without visible images. Composition is not to create objects but arrange objects; there is a strong 'metaphor' color in space segmentation and a profound internal relationship with philosophy, ethics, and sociology." [8]

In response to the metaphor in composition of traditional Chinese painting, Jiang Chengqing sums up three ways.

The first is to arrange the composition based on ethical spirit. Ethics is the order norm of interpersonal relationships in Chinese society, such as the relationship between the monarch and his subjects, between father and sons, and between master and servants. This concept of using ethical order to regulate and arrange the position also profoundly reflects the composition of landscape painting. The obvious characteristics of the upper, middle, and lower parts in the composition are derived from the "three characters (三才, namely natural law, personality and the fortune in age of 1-17)" theory in composition theory of Chinese painting, which is a deep aesthetic concept. Reflected in painting, "three characters" is to divide the space on the composition into the upper, middle and lower parts. In the composition of Chu Teh-chun's paintings, "three characters" also symbolizes the three-layer relationship between heaven, people and earth.

The second is to establish the composition principle of painting from the integrity of the universe and the mutual promotion and restraint relationship between all creatures, to understand the beauty in composition from the unified and complete universe, and to acquire the skill of layout from the nature and experience the balanced operation, harmonious and rhythmic order of the universe. The holistic nature reflected in the high integrity of the composition in Chu Teh-chun's picture is the result of his years of following up Cézanne's researches on the structure of pictures. Critic Lin



Minggang said, "According to my contact with Chu Teh-chun, I found that he often uses a large stroke to sweep, and casually creates some relations, then quickly find the composition in the picture, and finally modify it. It seems to be casual, but it is to find the composition sporadically; but the heavy, light, thick and thin processing are all rational". [9] The twisted and turned flowing landscapes are the motifs of Chu Teh-chun's paintings. He abandoned the imitation of specific object, pursued an ideal form of self, and determined it at the level of transcending reality. Chu Teh-chun inherits the "meaningful form" that Cézanne discovered from the nature; in his paintings, this form is embodied as the internal order of the Chinese universe.

The third is the composition theory constructed on the basis of dichotomy. The study of painting is inspired by the philosophy of natural law, a series of concepts proposed by Chinese classical painting theory are opposite and coexist, and appeared in groups, such as the Lord and the guest, sparse and dense, open and close, virtual and real, hidden and exposed, hidden and explicit, complex and simple, vertical and horizontal, dynamic and static. In Chu Teh-chun's works, it is embodied as the theory of "yin and yang of light". He arranges various facial relations in the picture, such as light and dark, yin and yang, large and small, inside and outside.

#### V. INTEGRATION AND INFINITE UNIVERSE

When appreciating Chu Teh-chun's works, there will also be a special feeling of integrating into the space shown in the picture. Driven by all kinds of noisy forces, the picture expands a route that invites viewer to enter the tour and guides viewer to enter a space full of poetry and contemplation. This is actually the result of the painstaking efforts of the painter to manage the picture space.

How did Chu Teh-chun acquire the skill of giving the sense of integration of this painting space? French critic Lidia Harlandberg described the state when Chu Teh-chun was painting as: "His large painting was drawn on the floor. In this way, the relationship between painting and space was changed; just as the critic Si Kongtu once advocated, he can be 'out of the ordinary thing and get its central thing.' The painter immersed in painting, and is dedicated to his work silently without other thinking but only self-question in mind. By capturing the light, Chu Teh-chun integrated various smoke effects into the picture, and used the brush to find the natural equivalent structure in this suffusion scene, and thus starting the ever-changing infinite transformation in circles". [10]

Dai Haoshi also talked about Chu Teh-chun's unique way of painting, "He intentionally or unintentionally quoted the Song Dynasty masters of landscape painting as the inspiration for the creation, arranged the horizontal line behind the viewer, and placed the viewer in the center of the composition, at the core of the picture space. He changed the relationship between the two and turned the viewing manner into active viewing. In front of viewer, the universe is like a spring rushing out continuously". [5] Chu Teh-chun puts himself in the picture, integrates with the picture space, uses the light and multi-dimensional illusion space, and grasps the

free space of imagination, leading viewers to a vast world of the universe through the brightness and darkness of lights, the change in colors and the link in structure.

Looking at the part of Chu Teh-chun's abstract picture background combined with the border again, you may find that he uses a wide and large brushstroke, extends outward in the direction of the brush, which makes the picture space and the external space connected, makes the picture having the trend of continuously expanding outward and creates a broader circulated virtue space.

Japanese critic Miyazaki Keji (宮崎克己) pointed out that the atypical art in Europe in the 1950s was a manifestation of modern humanitarian or individualism. The canvas with size equivalent to the size of human body reflects the painter's height and also makes the viewer feel like facing another person and get aware of the body of the painter or the viewer himself. The lines and color faces they depict not only give people a physical and touchable feeling, but also often make people aware of the border of the picture, and the brushstroke lines are roughly within the border. Chu Teh-chun's early abstract works are concrete manifestations of being affected by atypical art. However after the 1960s, Chu Teh-chun changed the structural lines that used to remain in the border of picture into a sharp stretching from the outside to inside or from the inside to outside of the picture, to expand the space outwards in a vertical and horizontal manner and also extend to wider space towards the deep place of the picture. Western modern painting always hopes to compress the depth of painting, and transform painting into plane, color faces, and surface, while what Chu Teh-chun wants to break away is this tendency of transform painting into plane. He no longer emphasizes the texture sense expressed by paints, but uses changeable brushwork to create a holistic impression. Western modern painters use "the moment in front of the eyes" as the final basis, while Chu Teh-chun first aims to transcend the current moment with the purpose of exploring the universe on his picture. [11]

Through the integration and extension of picture space, Chu Teh-chun released the "small universe" of personal life, thus created a "big universe" on the picture, leading viewers to explore the meaning of cosmic space. From his works, Miyazaki Keji has seen the universe in Chinese philosophy: "Western people imagine the 'universe' as a night sky-like closed hemisphere that scattered with many stars, and the universe is seen as a 'whole' governed by Gods at every corner; the universe seems to be a huge 'container' that contains everything. Chinese universe is not a huge container. It does not pay much attention to whether the internal composition of the universe needs to be logical but is a vast body of life beyond human's imagination; its space is not empty and void but a place to exercise strong will. Perhaps it is not a pure space, but has huge energy with repeated generation and destruction characteristics in the space and time. This also helps to understand the relationship between the constituent elements in Chu Teh-chun's paintings: the elements are not isolated rational judgments and abstract existences, but a life community with them connected by flesh and blood and mutually dependent as a whole. ... Through those works, Chu Teh-chun echoes his inner world

and the universe, and the light shining in the virtual sky in dark blue and purple colors is like the light around us. It is also like the light emitted by a celestial body due to the explosion of the universe. There are not only imaginative and intuitive life and death, but also the vitality of transcendence through mighty momentum, which allows people to see generation and destruction, as well as satisfaction and pleasure". [11]

## VI. CONCLUSION

Based on above summarization, it can be seen that over many years of exploration on art, Chu Teh-chun has found his own unique expression manner in the processing of space in abstract painting. His picture space has distinct principal-subordinate relation and is full of strong sense of light and shadow. It not only has the poetic philosophical metaphor of Chinese landscape painting, but also presents the multi-dimensional and infinite sense of the Eastern cosmology. On the basis of the principle of space composition in modern abstract painting, he also absorbed the principal-subordinate law in composition of western traditional painting, the drama light in classical painting, the external light feeling of impressionism, also penetrated into Chinese traditional culture, integrating the multi-dimensional cavalier perspective, metaphorical composition and the unique recognition on the universe as shown in Chinese painting, further constructed his unique lyrical abstract space based on light and colors. With respect to how to deal with the combination of spiritual appeal of the times and traditional art, and how to integrate western and Chinese paintings and find own artistic style, Chu Teh-chun's hard work and rich experience have given people many inspirations.

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