

The Importance of Copying in Basic Teaching of Sculpture

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Abstract—Since the 20th century, copying has been weakened in the teaching of Chinese art, especially in sculpture teaching. Too much emphasis on sketching makes the learning process long and complicated. Teaching is an organized activity of transferring cultural knowledge, through which the process of human cognition can be greatly shortened. Copying, as an effective means of art teaching, has played an important role in art education in the East and West. Through copying, students can learn from the excellent skills of predecessors, find a pattern suitable for their own personality, control and grasp the changing visual world. Specialization of objects on the basis of generalization provides a modified basis for the development of technology.

Keywords: art, teaching, sculpture, copying

I. INTRODUCTION

Ancient artists created excellent sculptures in their twenties. Michelangelo Simoni created *Bacchus* at 21 and *David* at 26. Gian Lorenzo Bernini sculpted *Apollo and Daphne* at the age of 27. The painted sculptures of Ming Dynasty in Shuanglin Temple, Pingyao, Shanxi, China have become a model for teachers and students of the Department of Sculpture of the Academy of Fine Arts to investigate and copy because of their superb artistic achievements. However, the local farmers who created the sculptures only made them in their spare time. This causes people to reflect on the existing teaching while marveling. According to the common understanding, after four years of affiliated high school study, five years of undergraduate study and three years of graduate study, a student can only be said to have the potential of sculptor. Most people don't become a mature sculptor until they're 30. It is true that talent is extremely important, but no one would agree that the students who have been educated in fine arts institutes since the beginning of the last century lack it. Therefore, the reasons need to be found in the teaching.

II. COPYING IS THE MAIN WAY OF ART INHERITANCE IN CHINA AND THE WEST

The artistic heights achieved by the masters are based on the efforts and accumulation of generations of people. Michelangelo was great because he "stood on the shoulders of giants." He not only inherited the fine traditions of ancient Greek, Roman and medieval art, but also learned from the works of early Renaissance masters such as Giotto, Ghiberti

and Donatello. Ancient Chinese sculptors paid more attention to the inheritance of skills. Previous generations learned through strict procedures, injected their own experience into them and made innovations, and then passed them on to their apprentices. After generations of efforts, they created outstanding works of art, such as painted sculptures in goddess hall of Jin temple, and painted sculptures in Shuanglin Temple.

Teaching is an organized activity of transferring cultural knowledge, which can greatly shorten the circuitous process of human cognition. Other disciplines, such as science, can pass on the work of generations in a few classes. The most direct way to learn the excellent achievements of predecessors in art education is copying. Copying, as an effective means of art learning, has played an important role in art history. Artists of the Renaissance began their studies by copying. Leonardo Da Vinci declared that "He who can imitate can create". Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres has an incisive discussion on copying, "It is necessary to constantly copy nature and learn to observe nature carefully. It is therefore needed to study the art of ancient Greece and Rome and the masterpieces of ancient masters, not merely to imitate them, but, I repeat, to learn their powers of observation. Do you really think I sent you to the Louvre to find some ready-made 'model of beauty'? There is no such thing in nature. In a declining age such folly can only deprave art. I have sent you to the Louvre because there you can learn from the ancient painters the method of observing nature, and they themselves are objective and natural, so you should experience what they have experienced and absorb what they have absorbed. The same is true of great art masters. Do you think I want to train you to be replicators when I urge you to copy? No! I want you to gather honey from the flowers." ¹ The study of Chinese traditional painting needs to start from copying, and many masters have class drawings spread in the world. The paintings were arranged and printed into painting charts, and the famous Mustard Seed Garden still plays an important role in the teaching of Chinese painting. The purpose of copying manuscripts and drawing charts is to train students to form preformed schemata and expression patterns about Chinese paintings, so that students can look at nature from the perspective of a

¹ [France] Ingres: Ingres' Essays on Art, translated by Zhu Boxiong. Guilin: Guangxi Normal University Press. May 2005: 43.

painter and express nature in the way of traditional Chinese paintings.

III. COPYING CAN MAKE LEARNING MORE EFFICIENT

Why is copying gradually neglected in present teaching? "The criticism of copying teaching begins with Jean-Jacques Rousseau. In his 1763 *Aimi'er*, he first proposed to reject the traditional teaching method of sketch foundation — copying. He thought that *Aimi'er* should imitate nature, not other people's things."² People who oppose copying often take the decline of European academicism and Qing Dynasty paintings as examples to prove that the learning method of copying is detached from the sensory world, constraining people's creativity, and the popularity of imitation by artists leads to the decline of art. The reasons for the decline of academicism and Qing art are very complicated, mainly due to the rigidity and conservatism of ideas, which cannot be attributed entirely to imitation.

In teaching, emphasis on sketching over copying is no different from learning without indirect knowledge. John Dewey, an American pragmatic educator, advocates "learning by doing". The process of learning is long and complicated due to the long and tortuous road of human cognition. Unlike natural science, art does not have formulas and laws that can be taught directly to students. However, some knowledge of regularity can be taught, such as the basic shape of each part of the body, the change of the body in motion. The best way to master these rules is to copy the programs in the works of predecessors. Ancient Chinese sculptors attached great importance to the induction of the formula. For example, there are "three court five" and "Zuo wu li qi dun san ban (Assuming people measure body proportion by the size of one's head, the person's vertical height is about the length of seven heads when he stands, five heads when he sits in a chair, and three and a half heads when he sits cross-legged)" on grasping the proportion of human body. There are "wen bu xian jian, wu bu lou xiang (When sculpting strong men, people should reduce the proportion of the shoulders of the literati, and show the rounded shape of the general and shorten his neck)" "Pu sa san dao wan (The overall shape of bodhisattva sculpture should be an s-shaped curve)" on grasping the character modeling personality characteristics. There are such terms as "Pao", "Duan", "Jie" on the law of dress pattern. These rules are summarized in their long-term observation, research and practice, which are easy to learn and master. Although western sculpture is not as stylized as ancient Chinese sculpture, there are still some different modes of expression. For example, Rodin concluded that the ancient Greek sculpture was "four faces" and Michelangelo carved "two faces". A closer study of ancient Greek sculpture will also reveal stylized tendencies in dealing with form. The ancient Greek sculptor Polyclitos once wrote *On the Rule of Sculpture* to elaborate the principle of "perfect sculpture", and created the *Diadumenos* to explain his theory. The

² Yin Shaochun. *Fine Arts and Education*. Changsha: Hunan Fine Arts Publishing House. June 1995: 227.

learning of the program can enable students to quickly grasp the basic laws and learn to grasp the complex and changeable nature with the eyes of a sculptor. Some argue that learning programs cause problems in conceptualizing students' assignments. However, programming is not the same as conceptualization, which results from the modification of the objective object by some dogma in the brain, independent of the personality characteristics of the specific object. The purpose of mastering the program is not to let students completely use the program to transform the object, but to establish a ruler in their mind through the program, and grasp the objective object by this ruler. Just like the software ZBRUSH, it provides a 3D standard human body model in advance. Every point on the human body can be dragged and the spatial position of these points can be changed to create various physical features. One of the goals of basic education is to get students to build such software in their heads.

IV. METHODS OF COPYING COURSES

Will copying affect students' personality and style development? Art theorist Chris pointed out that "we have come to realize for a long time that art does not arise out of nothing, and that no artist can achieve something without learning from his predecessors and his style."³ John Constable believes that there are two ways to form the personality of artistic expression. One is formed from the observation and expression of nature. Rodin spent much of his youth studying ancient Greek and Roman sculptures in the Louvre, and Van Gogh also copied many of Miller's works. Picasso, a master of modernism, was particularly interested in studying and reinventing the works of his predecessors. In 1951, for example, he completed a total of 58 works, 44 of which were variations on Diego Rodriguez de Silva y Velazquez's *Las Meninas*. Copying can help students learn from the excellent skills of predecessors, find a pattern suitable for their own personality, control and grasp the changing visual world. Specialization of objects on the basis of generalization provides a modified basis for the development of technology. As Gombrich pointed out: "Without medium and preformed schema that can be imitated, no artist can imitate phenomena"⁴

At present, the copying courses in the basic teaching of sculpture major in each academy of fine arts in China are mainly set up in the courses of the lower grades. The subjects include skulls, plaster heads and plaster figures of human anatomy, and the lessons are mostly a transitional phase between sketching and clay. Compared with sketching course, it has less class time and single content. In addition to the subjective factors analyzed above, the objective reason is that the sculpture works collected by China's academy of fine arts are relatively few and the quality is not high. In order to make copying teaching play its important role, people need to pay attention to the collection of works. Now the Central Academy of Fine Arts has established a plaster house to

³ [UK] E.H.Gombrich. *Art and Illusion*, translated by Zhou Yan. Changsha: Hunan People's Publishing House. January 1987: 34.

⁴ [UK] E.H.Gombrich. *Art and Illusion*, translated by Zhou Yan. Changsha: Hunan People's Publishing House. January 1987: 140.

display copies of Chinese and western excellent sculptures for students to learn, which is worth learning and promoting.

The specific methods of copying are divided into complete copying and decomposition copying. Complete copying refers to the complete copy of the work, with the likeness of the object as the standard to learn the master's processing and performance methods. Decomposition copying is to study a certain part or factor of the object according to the special purpose, so as to obtain some benefits in the limited time.

In the process of copying teaching, teachers must explain clearly to students that copying is always a means rather than an end, and copying is a way for students to grasp and express reality, thus forming the basis of innovation. After all, the technique acquired by copying is a kind of proficiency learned. The purpose of mastering procedures and rules is to break these rules and regulations. To create works with vitality, people must combine them with their own feelings, understandings and emotions for change and creation.

V. CONCLUSION

On the one hand, the copying of excellent sculpture works can help students quickly master the basic knowledge and basic methods of their major; on the other hand, it enables them to find a pattern suitable for their own personality by learning and drawing on the excellent techniques of predecessors. In this way, they can control and grasp the changing visual world, make the object special on the basis of generalization, and provide a corrective basis for the development of technology. In the basic course of sculpture, copying course should be added appropriately, which can reduce the process of beginners' exploration and improve the learning efficiency.

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