

# The Color Features of Chu Teh-chun's Abstract Paintings

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## ABSTRACT

This article studies the unique color style characteristics of Chu Teh-chun's abstract paintings and summarizes them into three points: the delicate feeling after the assimilation of ink of oil painting, the gorgeous feeling produced by the contrast and expression of light sensation, and the poetic rhythm produced by transcendental perception. Through the summary and analysis of these color characteristics, it reflects that against the background of the times and the pursuit and exploration of self-art style, the painter's attempts and thoughts on the absorption and combination of the spirit of the times and traditional arts, as well as his enlightenment on the development of contemporary Chinese art creation.

*Keywords: Chu Teh-chun, abstract painting, color*

## I. INTRODUCTION

As an important expression language, the color in oil painting has unparalleled advantages of other paintings, which has a wide range of pigments, strong coverage and extremely rich expression. By controlling the proportion of oil, it can produce various changes from thick to thin, as well as various effects of matte and bright. Under the action of a pen or knife, the pigment can also produce a variety of changes from the smooth feeling to sense of relief. The early western classical oil paintings were restricted by conditions, and the use of colors had certain limitations. With the industrial revolution and the production of tubular pigments, guided by the principles of modern optics, the colors of French impressionist painting have advanced by leaps and bounds, and the picture effect has gradually become rich and bright. Later Fauvism and Expressionism put more emphasis on the subjective use of color, directly using primary colors for painting, and the role of color was greatly enhanced. On this basis, Kandinsky, the founder of abstract painting, used a scientific method to analyze and sort out the nature and function of color, and abstract painting was also able to freely control color in the picture.

Mr. Chu Teh-chun is the first academican of the ethnic Chinese Academy of Arts in France and a world-renowned master of abstract painting. He graduated from Hangzhou Art College in his early years and went to France in 1955 to pursue artistic ideals and transferred to abstract painting then. The Chinese and international critics generally believe that his abstract works combine the essence of eastern and western

paintings, especially the rich and colorful colors in his paintings, which are unique and special, perfectly blending the elegance and romance of French painting with the poetic and artistic splendor of traditional Chinese culture.

What are the unique characteristics of the colors in Chu Teh-chun's abstract paintings? How did he comprehend and discover these style characteristics in his artistic practice? This article studies and summarizes this.

## II. FINENESS OF SILK — THE OIL PAINT'S ASSIMILATION OF INK

Compared with other painters, the abstract works of Chu Teh-chun's mature period are characterized by a rendering sense of water and ink dripping. This is the effect of the delicate blooming color caused by the dilution of the paint with a large amount of oil and solidification and drying in the painting. Wu Guanzhong described this kind of picture effect, saying: "Chu Teh-chun boldly and resolutely strives to develop the epochal and cosmopolitan character of Chinese pen rhyme and black illusion in oil paintings. He carries forward the characteristics of the traditional Chinese paintings created by the pen and ink movement, silk or rice paper quality and texture, which are suitable for close-looking and intriguing".[1]

Chu Teh-chun's abstract works in the French exploration period, which were influenced by non-stereotype art, paid more attention to the composition of the picture. At this stage, his works used a lot of black thick line structure, and the paint was also dry and

heavy, and the state of prudence of his thinking and consideration can be seen then. After the 1960s, he began to regain ink painting. He couldn't buy rice paper in Paris, and used local blotting paper, which was used to package meat, to paint. Affected by the ink painting, the technique of thick scraping paint used in the original palette of Chu Teh-chun's abstract works disappeared, and the thick and rough picture was gradually replaced with the ink-like warm and flexible texture effect. He controlled the use of oil in the painting, implanting the characteristics of "water" in the ink painting into "oil", producing a "dense, light, dry, wet, coke" effect like ink painting, changing the thick and sticky characteristics of traditional western oil paints, and making them both light in watercolor and deep in ink. This kind of ink painting effect like rice paper and black illusion is subtle, elegant and transparent, contrasting with the bright and soft thick paint of the central area and producing a strange and wonderful visual charm, which is a unique creation in which he combined Chinese ink painting techniques with western oil painting.

"Oil" has only been used as a blender in the history of western oil painting production, and has not changed much since the invention of oil painting by the Van Eyck brothers in the 15th century. The oil in classical oil painting is mostly used for repeated modification and light and shade cover dyeing. In the one-time painting method of modern painting, such as Hals and Velazquez, the role of oil was to ensure the smooth movement of the painting process. Even in modern painting, although Matisse used a thin painting method with a lot of diluted oil in his works, the role of "oil" has not been fully paid attention to and significantly improved. Only in the 19th century, the English landscape painter Turner applied the dilution technique of watercolor painting to oil paintings, thus expressing the hazy effect of atmosphere, cloud and rain. Compared with Turner, Chu Teh-chun fully realized the rich role of "oil" in oil paint, and discovered the special and rich expressive function contained in this material. In 1995, he specially painted a work "Salute to Turner", which used a lot of thin painting methods using oil, expressing respect and reference to the masters of the predecessors.

Chu Teh-chun's expansion of the role of "oil" was inspired by the development of the "water" function in Chinese ink painting. Jiang Chengqing pointed out in the "Spiritual System of Chinese Painting" the "waking up ink" effect of water in traditional Chinese ink painting. "Water is not a pigment, it is colorless and transparent, and it is hard to say that it is a painting tool in the usual sense, but only if it is colorless, it can "manage" the various colors and strengthen or lighten the effect of color and ink. Mr. Pan Tianshou said: 'Without water, the ink won't awake.' In other words, without water, the ink is like in a deep sleep status, and

its expressive power can't be discovered. As the name implies, the word '水墨画' (water, ink and painting) begins with water, and then goes to ink. Technically, it serves to show that water is more important than ink. The raw rice paper used in Chinese painting has strong penetration and vignette properties and is very sensitive to water. Qian Songyan also said that "using ink color to keep the life of water forever". The method of the use of ink and water is about water, the so-called withered, moist, dry, wet, thick, light, and the so-called splashing ink, accumulating ink, broken ink, there is no way to say them without water.' Using brush, moisture, and paper are trinity.' Chinese painting relies on water to obtain texture effects, such as the misty clouds and the airy imagery, all of which are the wonders of water. From the thickest ink to the lightest ink, the essence is that the content of ink continues to decrease, and the proportion of water increases accordingly. This is a process of water dilution and dilution of ink. It can be said that water makes five colors." [2] Through his understanding of the role of "water", Chu Teh-chun comprehended by analogy, introduced the unique method of water use in Chinese ink painting into oil paintings, used Chinese pen and ink to enrich the expressive power of oil paintings, deepened the ideological connotation in the paintings, and created new forms of painting.

Taiwanese critic and painter Chu Ge praised that: "Chu Teh-chun is best at sowing the canvas as soil. He inputs a feeling in the pen-and-ink lines to make the lines themselves full of life, just like they are organic matter derived from the soil of the painting." [3] Chen Xiejun, the former curator of the Shanghai Museum, also said: "Chu Teh-chun discussed the western oil painting vocabulary from the perspective of ink painting, which transformed the brushstroke effect of the western oil painting into a general situation of brush and ink, so that the lines and strokes of the oil painting 'contain pen and ink'. The unique dripping clarity of the ink effect and the advantages of the bright and heavy oil paintings interact with each other, which enhances the visual vitality of the picture. The multi-stage staining effect stimulates the viewer's free imagination, and the work looks vivid and profound." [4]

### **III. GORGEOUS LIGHT — THE CONTRAST AND PERFORMANCE OF COLOR LUMP**

Most of the backgrounds in Chu Teh-chun's abstract works are thin and dark colors of the same color scheme, and use a wide brush to display a visual "color field" to form a sense of atmosphere for creating environment; the area of the central is a relatively small bright color area. These bright colors are mostly painted with thicker pigments, which contrast with the "thin" background, forming a primary and secondary relationship, and are often contrasting colors in cold

and warm colors. In the bright color zone, he uses rich and bright colors to create the visual focus of the picture, which forms another contrast with the overall "gray".

The critic Shui Tianzhong believes that Chu Teh-chun's abstract paintings are bright "center" and dim "edge" paintings, which are close to the concepts of "guest and host", advance and retreat" and "coping" in traditional Chinese painting. The calm background, the vibrant patches, the wandering lines, and the overall color layout have been thoughtfully arranged, but they also have a fresh and wonderful improvisation. He concluded that under the influence of Chinese culture, Chu Teh-chun has a random partial and orderly whole. In the combination of form and color, each color maintains a high degree of harmony in contrast between the hue, light and dark and the overall picture.[5]

The author believes that Chu Teh-chun's color contrast relationship of "center", "edge", "light and shade" and "cold and warm" also comes from the color comprehension of impressionist external light technique in his early years. The colors in western oil paintings can perfectly express the author's true visual experience. The biggest feature of oil painting materials is richness and ductility, which can make full use of various techniques to fully show the subtle changes in color. The oil paintings of the classical period generally only deal with the relationship between light and shade, and the bright parts are generally colored, and the shadows are blackened. With the new discovery of the relationship between light and color in the development of modern optics as well as the outdoor sketches brought by the popularization of industrial pigments, impressionist painters have increased their understanding of colors in the external light sketches, and the dark parts have colors, which begin to show the cold and warm contrast between light and color. And the color expression has also become richer and more gorgeous. The colors in Chu Teh-chun's paintings are also affected by light, and there are delicate warm and cold changes in the light and dark spaces. Light creates a sense of atmosphere and subtle color contrast. Color is subordinate to the whole and unified to the light source.

Chu Teh-chun has experienced orthodox learning of the color language of western oil painting. In his early years at the Hangzhou Art College, he accepted the impressionist light-color theory under the guidance of Wu Dayu. During the process of learning and teaching, he accumulated a lot of sketching experience and deeply discussed the principles of light and color in modern painting. After going to France, he traveled all over the art museums, directly learning from the works of western masters, and receiving the most direct orthodox practical aesthetic education. At the same time, in the process of studying abstract paintings, he

also accepted Kandinsky's modern chromatic theory, leapfrogging into the intrinsic expressive function of modern painting colors. Kandinsky said in analyzing the intrinsic function of color: "Putting the intrinsic value of matter on an objective balance: people looking at yellow will feel dazzling and restless, which is the rough nature of color. It oppresses people's emotions, and the yellow tint can make people unbearable, like a sharp and loud horn or bugle sound. If it adds blue, it will produce a morbid tone (like a hoarse throat). If you use color to express your mood, yellow doesn't mean melancholy or suspicion, but represents madness, blindness and madness and infatuation in a manic state... Blue is the typical color of the sky. It has a high sense of stability, can be as dark as black, and shows a ultramundane melancholy, giving a solemn and serious feeling...Pure green is the most stable color. It doesn't move to any side. It is not happy or sad or painful. It doesn't require or shout. This immobility gives comfort to tired people, but excessive silence tends to make people feel monotonous.[6]"

The re-recognition of colors in modern paintings has deepened the connection between colors and people's inner emotions. The color expression in paintings also pays more attention to emotional appeal. The "color field painting" in abstract expressionism painting is directly based on the theme of color field relationship, and uses color to express the inner spirituality of people. When talking about the color expressiveness of Chu Teh-chun's works, Hong Kong critic Lin Niantong said: "Chu Teh-chun combines the abstract factors of Delacroix's research on color feelings with the optical factors of Caravaggio and Rembrandt in mid-tone areas of light and shade, and uses complementary color contrast and the coordination of various similar colors to increase the effect of color, so as to change the color from 'slave of light' to what Cezanne called 'incarnation of ideas'. Emotional activities are bound to be expressed in words, expressing the grief and righteous indignation of the painter at will."[7] Lin Niantong's "incarnation of ideas" is to transform the invisible emotions into visible colors and shapes.

In Chu Teh-chun's 2005 work, "Song of Joy", it can be seen that orange and red as a warm color play a role in creating the emotional atmosphere of the picture, and also have a direct guiding effect on color from "visual — emotion" and "physiology — psychology", which is the directness pursued by modern painting.

#### **IV. LINGERING CHARM OF POETRY — THE TRANSCENDENCE AND SUBLIMATION OF PERCEPTION**

When people appreciate the colors of Chu Teh-chun's abstract paintings, in addition to expressiveness, they can also understand the painter's more profound

intentions: the relationship between colors often implies a certain scene and situation in nature. The color relationship not only includes visual experience, but also implies and enriches rich associations with multiple perceptions such as temperature, humidity, touch, and hearing.

For example, in the 1997 work "Sunshine After Rain", various light blues and dark blues form a cool-toned picture, which is like a cool feeling after rain, and at the same time seems to have a refreshing breath of rain. The yellow in the upper left corner is not only the complementary color of the balanced picture, but also symbolizes a touch of sunshine after the rain. Also, in many works of Chu Teh-chun, not only can people see red warblers and green willows, as well as dense willow trees and bright flowers, but also seem to hear wind, running water and feel the cold of winter and the warmth of spring, and various consciousness such as vision, hearing, smell and touch act together.

The traditional Chinese painter's "look" at the landscape is not simply a sketch of the scenery in western realistic paintings, but a kind of memory that remains after observing the scenery in depth. The artist not only looks, but also listens and touches, and then integrates various senses, leaving a crystallization of common consciousness. After returning to the studio, the artist replaced the visual sensations observed in nature with a formal relationship in the picture, thereby implying the emotional resonance between man and nature. After the 1970s, Chu Teh-chun increased reading of traditional Chinese poetry in his spare time. He hoped to find new inspiration from the observation methods and poetic images of traditional painting. He liked to see collected Tang poems and collected Song poems, and found that Chinese poetry was implicitly abstract with cultural appeal, and the artistic conception he created was exactly what he wanted to convey in his paintings. He realized that to paint something in China, he must express the spirit of Chinese painting based on the form of western painting. The realm of Chinese painting is the realm of Chinese poetry. Poetry and painting, including calligraphy, can't be separated. The starting point of Chinese literati painting is poetry. Inspired by the transcendental perception of Chinese ancient poetry, he integrated his own feelings and images, surpassed the imitation of natural colors, and obtained the jump and sublimation of the perceptual system, thereby making up for the rigidity of western abstract painting color theory.

French critic Lydia Harambourg described the world in Chu Teh-chun's paintings as a space where you can taste poetry, revealing all the mysteries of poetry. In his large-scale works, the color becomes a tribute to imagination and primitive landforms. The surface of the canvas has suffocating magic and people's will feel so intimate the first time their eyes see

them. The visible objects of mountains and valleys, the sky and the deep sea, caves and waterfalls are transformed into experience of invisible objects.[8] "The experience of transforming what is visible into something that is not visible" is the "image outside the image" described in western languages.

The critic Fan Di'an used "perceived adventure" to describe Chu Teh-chun's use of color: "He used a childlike perception to record the initial experience of this world; this experience is lively, vivid and innocent, but it easily passes away and often disappears in adulthood; but in his works, the image of color becomes the theme, retaining the innocent interest of 'the beginning of man'; the various contrasting colors, complementary colors and adjacent colors in the picture can be freely combined to form a different spatial atmosphere with the contrast of thin and thick, clear and dense, and full and empty." [9] The "color perception adventure" that Fan Di'an called is actually the perception surpassing of realistic paintings simply imitating the apparent color of things.

At the same time, when people review traditional Chinese painting, due to the long-term influence of Taoist philosophy, it has formed a special "less is more, more is vulgar" color aesthetic style, that is, it pays attention to the simple change of ink color, and thinks that more color is more vulgar, which also restricts the use and development of color in Chinese painting. Speaking of this, Chen Xiejun said: "Comparing Chu Teh-chun's colorful oil paintings with vivid ink paintings, it can be seen that he learns from each other's strengths and weaknesses in the east and west, as well as oil painting and ink painting. He builds a bridge between two different kinds of art in two spaces, which solves the problem of "color" deficiency that has long plagued Chinese painting." [4]

## V. CONCLUSION

From the above summary, it can be seen that through years of artistic exploration, Mr. Chu Teh-chun has found his own unique way of expression in the use of colors in abstract paintings. He firstly delved into the materials of western oil paintings, then sought inspiration from traditional Chinese ink paintings, and injected the richness of "water" into the application of "oil" to form the fantastic and wonderful effect of "oil painting on silk", which greatly enriched the expressive power of oil painting materials. At the same time, he drew on the warm and cold effects of impressionist painting colors and the modern painting's understanding of color expression to form gorgeous and expressive color effects. Finally, he returned to the transcendental perception of the "integration of poetry and painting" in Chinese traditional culture, surpassing the imitation of natural colors in western oil paintings and broadening the color image representation of abstract paintings.

As the representative of the second generation of Chinese oil painting, although Mr. Chu Teh-chun was in a foreign country, he never forgot his cultural responsibility and diligently pursued his artistic pursuit all his life. He integrated Chinese and western paintings, and through the pursuit and exploration of his own artistic style, he perfectly combined the spirit of the times and traditional art. His experience and efforts are people's valuable cultural resources and spiritual wealth, and are worthy of study and reflection by today's art creators and researchers.

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