

# Aesthetic Differences in Eastern and Western of Female Figures in *Court Ladies Adorning Their Hair with Flowers* vs. *Las Meninas*

Helen Lam<sup>1,\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Walnut Hill School for the Arts, Visual Art, Natick Massachusetts, United States, 01760

\*Corresponding author. Email: helen.lam0710@gmail.com

## ABSTRACT

East and West are two extremes in the cultural development of the world over thousands of years. As for the aesthetics in female figures, Eastern and Western worlds always show the viewers the beauty and characteristics in two aspects. This paper would explore the differences of beautiful female figures in arts in two cultures to find out the features of two aesthetics and why these features can appear. There were two masterpieces in the long history of two cultures that can be the representatives to show these aesthetic differences, which are *Court Ladies Adorning Their Hair with Flowers* by Zhou Fang and *Las Meninas* by Velázquez, one of them is from Tang Dynasty of eastern culture and the other one is from the western country Spain in 17th century. They both utilized royal female figures to represent their own historical distinguishing ideas in beauty. This paper would start with the basic information about paintings and both historical and artists' backgrounds, then getting into the comparison to searching the differences and similarities. According to this paper, the final conclusion is that although east and west are both pursuing beauty in arts, western people prefer a special sharpness with outstanding feeling, while eastern people always love smoothness and peaceful appearance, which lead two oppositions in the beauty of east and west.

**Keywords:** *Court Ladies Adorning Their Hair with Flowers*, *Las Meninas*, the Maids of Honor, female figures, cultural variation, cross-cultural comparative study

## 1. INTRODUCTION

There are numerous points that can be researched and studied between East and West cultures, the aesthetic is one of them. It is undeniable that there is a huge difference in beauty between East and West for women, including make-up, dressing, hair styles and so on. In this field, there are lots of books and papers talking about the characteristics of each, but the comparison between two is not often to see. This paper will show the background information about two times, two artists and two works in both the West and East world, then make a comparison to find out the detailed differences between them based on the visual and historical evidence. This research is meaningful since it can make people understand the modern aesthetic from East and West nowadays and even predict the tendency of beauty of this world that is becoming globalization in the future.

### 1.1. *Court Ladies Adorning Their Hair with Flowers and Zhou Fang*

*Court Ladies Adorning Their Hair with Flowers* was a piece which was painted by Zhou Fang around late 8<sup>th</sup> - early 9<sup>th</sup> century A.D. Although there is no accurate record that can tell nowadays people the date of its creation, this work was recognized as a classic in Chinese figure paintings during the Tang Dynasty.[1] It illustrated a scene where six ladies view the flowers in the imperial courtyard. In the piece, the painter depicted five court ladies and one maid. Between these human figures, there are cranes, dogs and flowers, which create connections that these isolated figures can interact with through these plants or animals.[2] Six ladies' garments are all made of thin gauze and they look exquisite and also valuable, which implies their special social class.[1] Zhou Fang put most of his attention on human figures by catching their expressions and the details on their head wears and dresses. This work was inspired from the real life of the

society at that period, which illustrated the ancient Chinese aristocratic women's extravagant but boring daily lives in the middle Tang period.[3] These ladies have gorgeous clothes, hair and facial makeup, but there is no smile on their faces. This presents the viewers with an atmosphere of that time period. Under the magnificent-life's surface, people's minds and lives were empty and meaningless.[3]

Zhou Fang, courtesy name Zhonglang, was a Chinese painter during the Tang Dynasty. He came from a noble background. Artist was the most famous identity that he had, but he was also an official at that time. He was good at figure painting and religious painting, and depicting aristocratic women was something that he was really good at. The court women in his pieces were elegant and plump, which were appreciated by the court officials at that period.

## **1.2. *Las Meninas and Diego Velázquez***

*Las Meninas* is an oil painting created by Spanish painter Velázquez in 1656. It can also be translated into English, which is *The Maids of Honor*. The 5-year-old Infanta Margaret Theresa is the central part of the piece as a solemn character with unconcealed childishness, surrounded by her entourage of maids of honour, chaperone, bodyguard, two dwarfs and a dog. [4] Just behind them, Velázquez portrays himself working on a large canvas, which is the most interesting and dramatic part of this work. It makes the viewers have a sense that they are joining in this work and the painting that they are looking at is a mirror, the princess, the maids and the other figures are all the mirror reflections. It is an artwork that has a secular feature, showing the daily court life. And at the same time, it also reveals a fact that the people who lived in the court at that period were unhappy. They are restricted by boring etiquette, even the little noble princess. She had lost the happiness of being innocent and childish that children should have, and must maintain a polite, reserved and precocious appearance.[4]

Diego Velázquez was a Spanish painter, he was the leading artist in the court of King Philip IV and of the Spanish Golden Age.[4] He was an individualistic artist of the contemporary Baroque period. He served the court for his whole life and always painted portraits for them. He usually only painted the things he saw, the human figures in his piece were really realistic and had a life-like facial expression; he also painted some religious pieces, but not as famous as his figure paintings.

## **2. SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES**

### **2.1. Similarities**

#### **2.1.1. Historical Background**

Diego Velázquez and Zhou Fang were from two

different periods in history, but it is acceptable to use their works to do the comparison. Velázquez was an artist in the Baroque period, and Zhou Fang was in the middle Tang Dynasty. Although it is almost 900 years distant from the middle Tang period to the Baroque era, the similarities still can be found. The middle Tang period was after the An-Shi Rebellion, although the development in art was not impacted, the government and the society were not as strong as before, and some internal contradictions also appeared, which imply the end of this dynasty in the future.[5] The historical background of Spain in the 17<sup>th</sup> century was similar to the situation of the middle Tang period. Many wars have led to the gradual decline of Spanish power and the continuous damages of its economic situation. Although it was the late part of the Spanish golden age, the development of art and culture is not in conflict with the chaos of a dangerous country. After the death of Velázquez, Spain was in ruin and convulsion.

#### **2.1.2. Identity**

*Zhou Fang* and *Diego Velázquez* were both famous in their figure painting, and they both also tried other kinds of painting in their lifetime. Their lives were both related to the court. Zhou Fang was born in a noble family and worked in court, and Velázquez was a leading court painter. Although their styles were totally different, they were both the outstanding ones in the artistic circle in the area that they were in during their time period.

### **2.2 Differences**

#### **2.2.1. Dressing styles**

The women in these two works are different in both clothing styles and hairstyles, which can be summarized as the difference between looseness and tightness. First of all, looking through Zhou Fang's piece, the female figures are wearing baggy dresses made of gauze and silk, which depicts the rich plump body contour of the ladies in the picture.[3] All the clothes seemed to just touch the skin, neither taut nor shaped, and viewers even could feel the sense of comfort from these dresses. On the other hand, women's hair in Zhou Fang's piece is tied up high loosely, and even raised.[2] This makes the contour of heads of these women concealed. Everything above about *Court Ladies Adorning Their Hair with Flowers* is expressing the pursuit to the senses of looseness and peace of Eastern aesthetics. On the contrary, what people pursue in Western art aesthetics is a feeling of tension and seriousness.[7] Looking through the little Princess *Infanta Margaret Theresa* in the center of the picture directly, although she was only 5-year-old and did not develop a mature body shape, the tight hair design on her head and corset and crinoline dress on her thin body are all showing the viewers a special dressing style of tightly exaggerated body line from the West.[4] The same was

true of the maids beside her, each wearing huge and their hair held tightly by complex headdresses, so that everyone could see the clear shape of their heads. Moreover, because Western art pursues realistic style, the light and shadow of the human body that the artist painted combined well with the tight-fitting clothes, which also increase the sense of tightness.

### 2.2.2. Groups

Although it is the same that there are a group of women in two works, they are still different. In *Court Ladies Adorning Their Hair with Flowers*, including a maid there are totally six ladies. Every figure has her own style of dress and hair making, and it is hard to distinguish which one is the most outstanding or who the artist wanted to stand out the most. Everyone in this piece is beautiful.[2] On the other hand, looking through Velasquez's work, what he wanted to stand out most is definitely the little princess in the center of the picture, which can be obviously found from the composition and the direction from the light in this work.[6] As for the light, it starts from the outside of the window on the right to the room inside, and it directly reflects on *Infanta Margaret Theresa's* face and body, while others all turn back to the light or do not even have front bodies in the piece. Therefore, it is easy for viewers to be immediately attracted to the little princess in the center. As for the composition, the upper part of the work forms an inverted triangle, from the lines of the ceiling to the maids of varying height, the vertex of the triangle is the princess.[6] In this painting, the princess is the main character, other maids, and even the artist himself, they are all existing to make the princess more outstanding, which is extremely different from Zhou Fang's work. In Zhou Fang's piece, different women are as beautiful as the same to form a peaceful artwork, while *Las Meninas* utilizes all the rest of the piece to highlight the beauty of the central princess figure.[6] The Eastern aesthetic prefers to show a harmony of all different beauties together, but the Western world uses other ordinary elements to cause most admired beauty alone to stand out.

## 3. CAUSES OF AESTHETIC DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE EAST AND THE WEST

The differences between both styles and groups are due to the long history of Eastern and Western cultures. Culture is a social phenomenon with the most extensive and profound influence in human social life, which is a process of constant development, and it can be explained into two specific topics: 1. The relationship between human and nature; 2. The relationship between humans and humans.

### 3.1. Human and Nature

Clothing style can be explained by the relationship

between human and nature in Eastern and Western cultures. Eastern culture values the harmony between human and nature, while Western culture emphasizes that humans need to conquer nature.[8] From *Court Ladies Adorning Their Hair with Flowers*, the light and thin silk dress is so soft that it covers the figure's body comfortably. The beauty in the human's natural body and the clothes are combined peacefully. However, *Las Meninas* show a special unnatural body shape from the Western aesthetic. In order to pursue the beauty in their minds, Western women even sacrifice the comfort to achieve. This is a typical example of "Conquering Nature". The origin of this kind of western thought can be traced back to the Bible. In the Bible, human and nature are enemies, like Noah has to build an ark to survive under impending flood. Humans have to struggle to conquer nature in order to survive, which is the Western mind that deeply opted in Western people's hearts.[8] Back to the East, ancient Chinese thinkers concluded the relationship between human and nature by the theory of "The harmony between man and nature" represented by *Yi Jin* (The Book of Changes). *Yi Jin* believes that humans are a production of nature and a part of nature.[8] This is the idea of the unity of nature and humanity, which has been in the minds of the people of the East for a long time that can be reflected in their aesthetics.

### 3.2. Individualism & Collectivism

Group differences can be explained by the relationship between human and human in Eastern and Western cultures. From the perspective of a group of harmonious women in the *Court Ladies Adorning Their Hair with Flowers* and the outstanding princess figure in *Las Meninas*, it can be concluded that East is collectivism, and the West is individualism. Such differences in thinking can be traced from philosophy and religion. Confucianism influenced Eastern people's minds as a philosophy, which believed that there was a basic order in the universe and a natural harmony linking man, nature, and the cosmos (heaven), and humans do not live in isolation.[8] In addition to Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism also have a profound influence on Eastern thinking and values. These religious cultures boil down to one point, which is to emphasize that people are one part of many complicated relationships.[9] Only not to emphasize oneself and integrating into the group is the most suitable.[8] From this, it can be seen that what the East prefers is collectivism in which everything is harmonious. Opposite to Western culture, the origin is the European ancient Greek culture. Aristotle, a representative of ancient Greek philosophy, believed that the world was made up of individuals (substances) occurring in fixed natural kinds (species).[10] Therefore, the Westerners do not have collectivist concepts. Looking through history, after the Roman Empire and the Middle Ages, Europeans have successively experienced

the spread of Christianity, the great nautical era, Renaissance and so on. They have become more open-minded, pay more attention to the pursuit of personal freedom and wealth.[8] Compared with the Easterners who did not open up their territories and only stayed in Asia, Europeans went to Africa, Asia, and then the Americas. The need to open up frontiers would cause Westerners towards individualism.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

Both *Court Ladies Adorning Their Hair with Flowers* and *Las Meninas* can be the representative pieces of art in each culture. From the aspects of dressing styles and groups, the figures of females in two works typically show the differences between Eastern and Western cultures in female aesthetics. The outstanding solemnity of Western culture and the harmonious softness of Eastern culture are reflected in these two works. Two pieces represent the beauty of females to the viewers, but one expresses the characteristics of Western sublime sense while the other one is showing the peaceful harmony from the East that is hidden in its cultures. By detailed observing and researching in these two pieces, it can be found that the characteristics are all caused by the opposite sides in both philosophy and history. Although the development of society and technology makes the current world more aesthetically diversified, it still takes more time to completely make the differences between the Eastern and the Western beauty disappear. Perhaps only when the two opposite ideologies and cultures become connected in common, it is when the Eastern and Western aesthetics are gradually unified as a same globalized beauty.

#### **AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS**

This paper is independently completed by Helen Lam.

#### **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

Many people have offered me valuable help in my paper writing, including my tutors, my friends and my parents. Initially, I would like to give my sincere gratitude to Prof. Sunglim Kim who gave me courses in Art History and provided me advice for my future study. I also want to express my special thanks to Chenkai Chi, my teaching assistant, who gave me great help by providing me with necessary materials and advice of great value and inspiration of new ideas. Then I am pleased to acknowledge Alisa Wang, my teacher of paper writing course, for her help in the making of this paper. Finally, in particular, I am going to give a big thanks to my parents for their support both from finance and spirit; they always encourage me to do what I want and study what I am enthusiastic about. Without them, I cannot finish this paper successfully.

#### **REFERENCES**

- [1] Pengyu Ren. *Court Ladies Adorning Their Hair with Flowers. Five Dynasties Late Tang Elements of Ladies Adorning*. LuXun Academy of Fine Arts. Nov. 2018.
- [2] Xiuwei Liu, Cuixia Han, *Interpretation of the aesthetic style of the characters in the Tang Dynasty from Court Ladies Adorning Their Hair with Flowers*, Duan Pian Xiao Shuo magazine. Feb. 2014.
- [3] Yalei Duan, *See the life of women in the Tang Dynasty through "Court Ladies Adorning Their Hair with Flowers"*. The College of Arts & Sciences Yunnan Normal University, 2017.
- [4] Yueling Li, Diego Velázquez and John Singer Sargent: *The Hidden Social Expectations in Female Portraits*, Atlantis Press, July 9, 2020.
- [5] Nian Zhang, *The writing of the Anshi Rebellion of Chinese poetry*, Shaanxi Normal University, May. 2019.
- [6] Schmitter, Amy M. "Picturing Power: Representation and *Las Meninas*." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 54, no. 3, [Wiley, American Society for Aesthetics], 1996, pp. 255–68.
- [7] Yupeng Chen, *Interpretation of the aesthetic style of the characters in the Tang Dynasty from Court Ladies Adorning Their Hair with Flowers*, Meishujie, May, 2012.
- [8] Li, Shoufu, *Differences, Original Causes And Influence Of Chinese And Western Cultural Traditions*. Beijing Normal University.
- [9] Harry C. Triandis, *Individualism-Collectivism and Personality*, 23 May, 2002.
- [10] Dunn, P M. "Aristotle (384-322 BC): philosopher and scientist of ancient Greece." *Archives of disease in childhood. Fetal and neonatal edition* vol. 91,1, 2006: F75-7.