

# The Development And Exploration Of Realist Oil Painting In Contemporary China And Russia

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## *Abstract*

This article explores the development of realism painting in contemporary China and Russia, as well as the exchange and cooperation between the two countries under equal conditions. The focus is on analyzing the development and exploration of realism oil painting in the new era of China and Russia. This includes the formation of the realism painting tradition in Russia, the different positions of socialist realism painting in Eastern and Western societies due to differences in worldviews and historical periods, the transformation of realism painting in the new era of China and Russia, and the exchange and cooperation under equal conditions. It particularly emphasizes the experiences and lessons of the development and changes in realism oil painting in China during the turn of the century. With China's economic reforms and comprehensive openness, the influence of Western modernist painting trends has led to a shift in aesthetic preferences in China. Moreover, the trust crisis triggered by the dissolution of the Soviet Union has led to a comprehensive critique of realism and socialist realism in both China and Russia. Artists and theorists from both countries are actively reflecting on the process of conveying and receiving realism and socialist realism painting between the two countries, seeking a healthy development pattern for painting in the new era of China and Russia.

Keywords: Realism, socialist realism, the development, development and exploration of painting.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The art exchange between China and the Soviet Union in the 1950s was, in fact, an interaction under asymmetrical conditions. China mainly sent traditional Chinese paintings and arts and crafts for exhibition in the Soviet Union, while the Soviet Union sent overwhelming amounts of oil paintings and prints to China. Since China's level of oil painting, including printmaking, was in its early stages at that time, they could only play the role of humble students. This kind of relationship was merely a one-sided artistic output from the Soviet Union, and it couldn't be considered as mutual exchange. The true exchange of oil painting between China and Russia can be said to have started in the late 20th century.

On one hand, Chinese oil painting, based on extensive absorption of various influences, broke away from simple imitation of Russian and Soviet painting as well as Western modernist painting. After more than half a century of exploration and development, it has formed its own Chinese characteristics and expressions, gaining recognition in the Western art world as a representation of the spirit of the times. On the other hand, Russian oil painting faced a dilemma after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Should it continue to adhere to the tradition of socialist realism or completely break away and fully embrace the Western modernist camp? This hesitation and confusion to some extent hindered the development of Russian oil painting.

This change of fortune has made Chinese oil painting capable of engaging in an equal dialogue with Russian oil painting. Malyavin, one of the greatest contemporary Russian realist painters, has visited China multiple times for exhibitions and exchanges. His artistic expression clearly reveals the influence of Chinese ink painting and the infiltration of Chinese spirit of freehand brushwork. He himself admitted to having benefited greatly from Chinese painting. Perhaps, it is only when both sides can "face each other on

equal terms" that true exchange can begin. Artists from China and Russia have discovered and absorbed energy from their respective rich traditions, exploring and making progress through the process of mutual exchange, and making unremitting efforts to explore the development of oil painting in the new era.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 The Formation of the Tradition of Realist Painting in Russia**

#### **2.1.1 Attempts at Russian Naive Realist Painting**

Since the late 18th century, Russian painting had adhered to the classical tradition of the Imperial Academy of Arts, strictly following the conventions of historical painting and focusing on ancient myths and biblical themes, distancing itself from real life. The victory in the Napoleonic Wars heightened Russian national consciousness and pride, leading artists to break away from religious subjects and pay attention to real-life issues. They began reflecting the suffering brought by war and glorifying the historical achievements of the Russian people in defending their homeland. However, during this period, the political environment in Russia was not lenient, and most artists, such as Repin, Perov, Shishkin, and Venetsianov, though depicting real-life scenes, were hesitant to openly express their viewpoints. Additionally, lacking scientific theoretical guidance, most artists were still in the stage of exploration in terms of their artistic concepts.

Their works merely aimed to portray touching images or landscapes that evoked emotional responses, lacking a strong humanistic spirit or political advocacy. As a result, they were referred to as "naïve realism." However, through the use of realistic techniques, they ventured to depict the customs and traditions of everyday life, showcasing the warmth of the real world. Compared to the previous focus on mythological and religious themes, this was still a significant progress. Their courageous attempts provided technical support and laid the groundwork for the subsequent development of critical realism in painting.

### 2.1.2 The Development of Critical Realist Painting in Russia

In the latter half of the 19th century, the political and economic system of serfdom in Tsarist Russia was no longer compatible with the modernization process taking place in Western societies, greatly hindering Russia's external communication and social progress. The failure of the Crimean War exposed the flaws of the serfdom system, awakening the Russian people from their slumber. They began to care about politics and the fate of the country, with a critical spirit prevailing among the population. The theories of critical realism by Chernyshevsky, Dobrolyubov, and Belinsky deeply resonated with the people, giving rise to a group of avant-garde artists in the realm of critical realism.

In literature, figures such as Nekrasov, Turgenev, and Tolstoy emerged, while in music, there was the "Mighty Handful" consisting of Mussorgsky and Borodin. In the field of painting, there were artists like Repin, Perov, and the famous "Wanderers" (also known as the "Peredvizhniki"). Repin excelled at portraying the small details of life, often imbued with irony and sarcasm. Perov's works were filled with sympathy for the lower-class laborers and exposed the corruption and incompetence of the decaying church and the dark rule of the tsar. The artists of the "Wanderers" delved deep into the lives of the lower strata of society, depicting the hardships of the working people and exposing the corruption and incompetence of the ruling class. Their paintings were imbued with a spirit of struggle, representing genuine works of critical realism.

The "Wanderers" produced renowned artists such as Kramskoy, Levitan, Surikov, and Shishkin, creating numerous great works of realism, including "Christ in the Wilderness," "Barge Haulers on the Volga," "The Morning of the Execution of the Streltsy," and "A Girl with Sunlight." These works not only expressed the artists' concerns for the fate of their homeland but also conveyed their respect for the working people and sympathy for revolutionaries, as well as their deep love for their country and its people.

In 19th century Russia, under the long-standing autocratic rule of the tsar, with a political climate that burdened the people with

suffering, literature and art became the optimal means of venting frustrations and lodging complaints. Critical realism painting found fertile ground and favorable conditions, rapidly developing into a leading global art movement.

### 2.1.3 The Persistence of Realist Painting during the Soviet Era

The landscape of Soviet-era painting experienced ups and downs. At the beginning of the "October Revolution," modernist art represented by the "Avant-garde" emerged as a powerful force. Artists like Malevich, Kandinsky, Chagall, and Tatlin gained fame in the West due to their strong sense of innovation, advanced art theories, and creative practices. They were also well-received within Russia (including the early Soviet Union).

However, modernism went too far in Russia (Soviet Union) and faced criticism from the Soviet leaders as it didn't align with the ideological needs of the state. From the mid-1930s, all styles and movements were unified under the banner of socialist realism. Despite experiencing Khrushchev's "thaw" in the middle, realism remained subservient to socialist realism.

Fortunately, due to the powerful and profound tradition of realism in Russia, not all artists were assimilated into socialist realism. For instance, Grigoriev's works hardly showed any traces of socialist realism but exuded a down-to-earth, humanely warm charm. His oil painting "Spring" portrayed the captivating atmosphere of a spring day and reflected the artist's hopes for the new situation.

Even among those artists who excelled in socialist realism, such as Gratsianov, Plastov, and Melenikov, there were still some remarkable works of realism. Melenikov's "By the Lake" displayed an elegant and tranquil color palette, expressing the artist's yearning for a serene and beautiful life. Plastov's "Summer" celebrated love with warm colors and a relaxed atmosphere, imbued with humanistic sentiments.

The simple and unadorned language of realism, which draws artistic inspiration from life and sings praises to the beauty of life, never

lacks an audience in any era. The tenacious existence of realism in Soviet times reflects both the continuation of Russia's strong tradition in realism and the general rule of artistic development: creations that remain free from political interference and ideological entanglement will always be the ultimate pursuit of human art.

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1 Research Methodology**

Referring to Chinese, Russian, and English literature on critical realism painting in Russia, socialist realism painting in the Soviet Union, and socialist realism oil painting in China, conducting a literature analysis and comparative study of visual materials. Seeking historical clues from the descriptions in the literature and revealing the trends of painting evolution through changes in images. This thesis primarily adopts a combination of literature analysis and artwork analysis, supplemented by field research and interviews with individuals, aiming to understand the causes and consequences of the development of Russian and Soviet painting, as well as Chinese realism and socialist realism oil painting, within the historical context. It also aims to uncover the logical relationships behind specific historical phenomena. We will examine the political background of the painting's development at that time, as well as artistic style tendencies in different socio-cultural contexts. We will explore both the significant positive impact of Soviet realism and socialist realism oil painting on Chinese painting and the negative effects resulting from excessive government intervention. Moreover, when reflecting on the experiences and lessons of Chinese oil painting development, it is important to avoid subjective and biased viewpoints or malicious attacks driven by retaliation, in order to provide a scientific, systematic, fair, and comprehensive evaluation of this important stage in artistic development.

#### **3.2 Comparative research method**

(1) Through a comparative analysis of commonalities, reveal the specific influences of Russian and Soviet painting on Chinese oil

painting in terms of form, color, technique, and composition.

(2) By comparing the development paths of Chinese oil painting before the establishment of the People's Republic of China, uncover the technical and socio-cultural influences of Russian and Soviet painting on Chinese oil painting.

(3) Through a comparison of the oil painting education systems, explore the commonalities and differences between the two countries in terms of painting training systems, the construction of formal language in painting, and aesthetic norms.

#### **4. Findings**

##### **4.1 The Transformation of Contemporary Realist Painting in Russia**

After the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the creative ideology of socialist realism faced questioning and criticism. People actively reflected on the successes and failures of the development path of Russian painting and quickly reversed the previous singular direction of socialist realism, returning to the essence of realist painting. In contemporary Russia, oil painting has embraced diversity and witnessed a variety of styles, forming a healthy and diverse development pattern. In contemporary Russia, several mature representational styles of oil painting include neoclassicism and new realism. Of course, there are many other types of oil painting styles and schools, but they will not be further discussed here.

First and foremost is the Russian neoclassical style of oil painting, represented by artists such as Nikolai Blokhin and Arshinikov.

Artists of the neoclassical style possess a solid foundation in realism and pursue the aesthetic qualities of classical beauty, light, and atmosphere. Nikolai Blokhin is an outstanding representative of the new generation of painters from the Repin Academy of Fine Arts. His strong skills in drawing and intense national style have contributed to his remarkable achievements in oil painting. Blokhin is also the only artist to have won gold medals in portrait competitions from two contrasting art organizations worldwide (ASOPA and PSA), and his drawings enjoy great renown internationally. His oil paintings

have a relaxed form, elegant and harmonious colors, and a strong sense of aesthetics, exerting a significant influence in the field of Chinese oil painting. Another young artist, Arshnikov, creates oil paintings that are elegant and delicate, characterized by gentle colors, soft lighting, and meticulous brushwork. This departs from the traditionally robust and powerful image associated with Russian oil painting, bringing a breath of fresh air. The artistic practices of Blokhin and Arshnikov have freed Soviet painting from its previous dominant patterns of strength and brilliance, creating a new elegant impression of contemporary Russian oil painting. In this reverie, people rediscover the essence of artistic spirit found in the works of artists like Shishkin and Kramskoy.

The second style is the New Realism, which is an important force in the New Soviet painting among the younger generation of artists. They draw inspiration from Melnikov's art and further develop it, combining strong characteristics of realism with distinct contemporary tendencies and personal styles. In particular, the oil paintings of Yuri Goluta, a teacher at the Repin Academy of Fine Arts, not only embody the solid tradition of Russian realism and the spirit of realism but also incorporate influences from Western classical and contemporary art, such as Goya from Spain and Babu from Romania. Of course, the art of Moiseyenko and Melnikov also nourishes the formation of Goluta's artistic style. Years of cultural exchange with China have endowed Goluta's paintings with a unique combination of Eastern freehand brushwork, characterized by rigorous oil painting techniques and ethereal harmony. This gives rise to a distinctive appearance of inclusive New Realism. The term "New Realism" is used to describe their paintings because, on one hand, they still reflect real life, focusing on human existence and the spiritual world, demonstrating the artist's perspective on the relationship between reality and humanity, in line with the characteristics of realism. On the other hand, their art takes on new forms and languages, not only reflecting the reality visible to the naked eye but also portraying a spiritual world that is often overlooked or not given much attention, yet is undeniably real. It carries significant metaphorical functions and partially exhibits symbolic colors. This style has a long-standing tradition in Russia, and we can faintly discern the influence of Fyodor Dostoevsky in



their works.

Modernism's strong sense of critique towards society is, in fact, an inheritance and development of the critique of realism in painting. The rebellion against traditional realism by the critique of realism has contributed to modernism's critique of its own traditions. The essence of the critique of realism in painting lies in its historical representation of realism and its critical symbol in a specific era. Although later socialist realism may bear the name and even the style of realism, it diverges from the essence of realism. Its excessive emphasis on factors outside of painting prevents it from attaining the same status in the history of world art as the Russian critique of realism in painting. Today, in contemporary Russia, the New Soviet painting, despite its inherent connection to traditional realism and even socialist realism, actively seeks innovation and exploration. On one hand, it aims to break free from the strong constraints of tradition and dispel the biases the world holds against Russian painting. On the other hand, it actively integrates into modern consciousness, aspiring to become part of the mainstream of modern Western painting. They seek a balance between realism and various modernist ideas, giving rise to a unique style and appearance, attempting to recreate the glory of the Russian critique of realism in painting.

#### 4.2 Cultural Exchanges and Transformations between China and Russia in their Development Process

After nearly a decade of silence, Russian realism painting experienced a revival at the end of the century and once again gained recognition from the Chinese people. This change can be attributed to four main reasons. Firstly, the reevaluation of Soviet realism painting by the West dispelled misconceptions and prejudices towards the Soviet style. Secondly, the return of exchange students who had studied in the Soviet Union (Russia) since 1989 brought back the latest developments in Russian painting, altering people's inherent perception of Soviet art. Thirdly, the implementation of special art programs in Russia starting from 2003 encouraged a large number of art school teachers and talented graduates to receive government-funded further education or

pursue degrees at top Russian art academies, greatly boosting confidence in studying in Russia. Fourthly, outstanding artists led by Melenikov frequently organized exhibitions and lectures in China, enabling the Chinese art community to gain a better understanding of the contemporary Russian painting scene, particularly the artistic principles and achievements of the "New Soviet School" of painting. This not only dispelled doubts about Russian painting being stagnant and conservative but also deepened mutual understanding through in-depth exchanges. Through exhibitions, lectures, and the influence of international students, the New Soviet School of painting was once again widely disseminated in early 21st-century China, heralding the revival of the charm of realism.

#### 4.3 The New Wave of Study Abroad in Russia

In 1989, Mikhail Gorbachev visited China, and both sides signed a series of education cooperation agreements. Sun Tao, Ye Nan, and others became the first group of art exchange students after the normalization of Sino-Soviet relations. However, with the collapse of the Soviet Union, they also became the last batch of art students to study in the Soviet Union. Due to the increasing choices of destination countries for studying abroad, the official plan to send art talents to study in Russia (Soviet Union) was effectively halted. However, the subsequent situation took an unexpected turn. Following the changes in the international situation since 1989, Western societies resumed sanctions and blockades against China, leading to a significant decline in official and cultural exchanges between China and the West. In the face of strong cultural and artistic needs, restoring and strengthening connections with Russia and Eastern European countries became a new choice.

In 1991, at the invitation of the Central Academy of Fine Arts and the China Academy of Art, Melenikov once again came to China to conduct a short-term painting training program. This was not only a result of the overall demand for Sino-Russian cooperation at the national strategic level but also demonstrated the renewed recognition of Russian realism painting, represented by Melenikov, by the Chinese people. Thanks to the recommendation and promotion of older artists who had studied in the Soviet Union in

the 1950s and the students who attended Melenikov's short-term training in Wuhan in 1956, the Russian New Soviet School of painting, represented by Melenikov's realism, quickly flourished in China. In 1996, Sun Tao and Ye Nan returned to China, bringing with them the solid drawing and anatomical teaching methods from the Repin Academy of Fine Arts. The publication of "Looking Back at the Neva" also aroused the longing of many art students for St. Petersburg and the Repin Academy of Fine Arts.

In 2003, the implementation of the Russian Art Special Program sparked a new trend of studying in Russia. In 2005, the large-scale documentary exhibition "Studying in the Soviet Union" opened at the National Art Museum of China, reviving fond memories and overflowing confidence in Russian and Soviet realism painting. Data from the Consulate General of St. Petersburg showed that as of 2017, among the 32,000 Chinese students (excluding Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macau) studying in Russia, the number of art students exceeded 3,500, accounting for more than one-tenth, which is also a relatively high proportion of Chinese art students studying abroad worldwide. This not only demonstrates the improved political climate between China and Russia but also proves the enduring charm of Russian and Soviet realism and realistic painting.

In the late 20th century and early 21st century, China witnessed a surge of interest in studying, researching, and collecting the oil paintings of Melenikov. As the currently active Chinese artists who studied in Russia mostly originated from Melenikov's teaching and supervision at his studio, a majority of the students who went to Russia to study in the new century chose to study under Melenikov and his disciples (today, three out of the six studio directors in the Painting Department of the Repin Academy of Fine Arts are direct disciples of Melenikov). Numerous articles and art catalogs have been published in China to introduce and study Melenikov's artistic style. Major art museums and private collectors eagerly seek Melenikov's works and have invited him multiple times to hold exhibitions and give lectures in China.

In 2010, with the approval of the Shanghai Municipal People's Government, the Jing'an District established an art museum named

after Melenikov, dedicated to showcasing the works of Melenikov and many other masters of realism from the Repin Academy of Fine Arts. This museum aims to promote Sino-Russian art exchange. This "hot" phenomenon goes beyond the usual scope and level of exchange, becoming a unique landscape in Sino-Russian art exchange in the new era. The overwhelming response to Melenikov reflects the resurgence of realism painting in China and Russia and demonstrates the Chinese oil painting community's renewed recognition of realism painting, opening a new chapter in deepening artistic exchanges between the two countries.

The success of Melenikov in China is not only due to historical opportunities (artists of the older generation who studied in the Soviet Union, such as Quan Shanshi and Su Gaoli, have received education from Melenikov and emotionally identify with him and his art) but also has an inevitable component of artistic development. After experiencing a long period of ups and downs in modern art, the oil painting communities and theoretical circles of China and Russia have rekindled their interest and hope in realism art and actively support the New Soviet School of painting. Today, exchanges and cooperation between the two countries have become normalized, and artists from China and Russia actively draw nourishment from each other's cultural traditions to develop and enrich their own painting styles. Realism painting in both countries is thriving, thanks to the efforts and contributions of artists from the older generation.

In addition to the students who attended Melenikov's short-term training programs in China, Chinese oil painters who studied at the Repin Academy, such as Xiao Feng, Quan Shanshi, Sun Tao, Ye Nan, Wang Tieniu, and Gu Zong, have promoted Melenikov's art and teaching methods, making them popular elements in the Chinese oil painting community.

#### 4.4 The Exchange of Chinese and Russian Oil Painting on the Basis of Equality and Mutual Assistance

Since the normalization of Sino-Soviet relations in the 1980s, particularly after the establishment of a new friendly strategic

partnership between China and Russia, the two countries have engaged in extensive cooperation and exchanges not only in politics, military, and economics but also in the fields of culture and education. However, this new phase of Sino-(Soviet) Russian cultural and artistic education exchanges differs significantly from the cooperation between the two nations in the 1950s. In the 1950s, the wave of studying abroad was predominantly one-sided, with the Chinese government leading and the Soviet Union providing comprehensive assistance to China's cultural and educational endeavors. In contrast, today's exchanges are based on equality and mutual benefit, with the government acting as a facilitator and the participation of the people in mutual learning and exchange.

In 2017, in addition to the 32,000 Chinese students studying in Russia, more than 18,000 Russian students were pursuing degrees or undertaking academic studies in China. This reflects the tremendous achievements in the development of cultural and educational exchanges between China and Russia, as well as the friendly cooperation between the two governments and peoples. Even in the field of oil painting, many Russian students come to China to study, not only exploring traditional Chinese painting but also studying contemporary Chinese oil painting art. With their strong foundation in oil painting and a deep understanding of China's contemporary spirit, these students demonstrate unique perspectives and distinct styles, showcasing the fruitful results of oil painting exchanges and artistic integration between the two countries.

Contemporary Chinese oil painting has not only achieved a high level of proficiency in techniques and pedagogical systems but has also developed a distinctive Chinese style and characteristics. This is not only due to the rich academic background of Chinese artists (who have studied or engaged in long-term research and creation in almost every developed country in the field of painting), but also because they draw inspiration from their own traditional painting heritage. Chinese oil painting has garnered widespread recognition, frequently winning awards at top international exhibitions and exerting a broad influence worldwide. It not only learns from Western painting but also contributes to the global art of oil painting.

An increasing number of artists from around the world are coming to China to exhibit, exchange ideas, and learn. On one hand, they recognize the bright prospects of China's art and believe that their own art will be recognized by Chinese audiences, whose artistic literacy is continuously improving. On the other hand, they are inspired and guided by China's profound traditional culture and the artistic concept that combines the essence of Western oil painting with Chinese culture. Learning from each other and seeking change and innovation through exchange has become a consensus among many artists who come to China. The creation and teaching of Chinese oil painting are increasingly developing and progressing within the framework of global cooperation and exchanges, with equal benefits and mutual cooperation among many friendly nations, including Russia.

With the ongoing wave of studying at Russian art academies and the widespread dissemination of the New Soviet School of Painting in China, the enthusiasm and hope for Russian-Soviet realism painting have been reignited. Since the beginning of the 21st century, Russian artists, represented by instructors from the Repin Academy of Fine Arts, have visited China numerous times to hold exhibitions and engage in academic lectures, plein air sessions, and training activities at institutions such as the China Academy of Oil Painting, the Central Academy of Fine Arts, the China Academy of Art, and other exhibition and creative organizations. These activities, supported by both private sponsorship and official funding, signify a new consensus in the Chinese art community to study, research, and promote realism painting.

It is understood that neither realism nor socialist realism should become the sole governing methods or ideologies in artistic expression and creation. However, the spirit of realism, as a cultural heritage of humanity, and the artistic path derived from socialist realism, will not fade away in the course of history. Realism in oil painting, like all other art styles, will continue to develop, progress, and endure in the realm of world art.

#### 4.5 The Steady Development of Realism Oil Painting in China

As with the ebb and flow of all things in the world, the development of oil painting art follows a similar pattern. In less than a century, Chinese oil painting has experienced a rapid journey through over 500 years of Western oil painting development. The prosperity has dissipated, and a sense of plainness emerged. After going through several pains, China gradually approaches the goal of exploring a path of oil painting with its own national and cultural characteristics.

#### 4.5.1 Exploration of Various Realist Painting Styles in China in the 1980s

##### (1) "Scar Art"

In 1978, "Wen Hui Bao" published Lu Xinhua's novel "Scars," signaling the beginning of China's criticism and reflection on the Cultural Revolution in the literary field. This, in turn, sparked debates about the ideas and values in literature. Inevitably, the revolutionary and transformative wave in literature soon spread to the field of painting. With the publication of the comic series "Feng" created by artists such as Chen Yiming, Liu Yu, and Li Bin, the "Scar Art" emerged as a new artistic trend in the new era, marking a turning point in the realm of fine arts.

"Feng" employed a positive approach to portray negative characters, which challenged the conventional painting methods in China for over a decade. It encouraged people to analyze the relationship between history and reality from a new perspective, leading to a transformation in artistic creativity. Subsequently, graduates from Sichuan Fine Arts Institute, including Luo Zhongli, He Duoling, Cheng Conglin, and Gao Xiaohua, created a series of works reflecting the experiences and destinies of people during the Cultural Revolution. These paintings, though inheriting the techniques of realism, represented a thorough rejection of the Cultural Revolution and its associated art. They exposed the confusion and numbness of contemporary youth concealed beneath the cloak of class struggle and political movements, revealing the inner pain and emotional scars of the people. It was a profound ideological dissection and spiritual self-exile, earning the name "Scar Art."

"Scar Art" had a strong impact on China's art scene at the end of the 20th century, owing to its powerful realism, distinctive contemporary relevance, and a certain critical perspective.

## (2) "Poetic Realism"

Whether it is the past revolutionary historical themes or "scar art," the main subjects of painting have been serious figures and events in the political domain. However, the emergence of rural realism painting shifted the focus to the ordinary lives of common people. This represents a spiritual rebellion against the aforementioned two styles and truly embodies the essence and purpose of realism. "Father" by Luo Zhongli, "Spring Awakening" by He Duoling, and "Tibetan Group Painting" by Chen Danqing are all outstanding examples of rural realism. "Father" marked the emergence of a new era in Chinese portrait oil painting. It was the first time such a large canvas was used to depict the head of a lower-class laborer without embellishment or discrimination. It portrayed the subject with unbiased attention and expression. Yet, the theme itself carries great symbolism—an honest and diligent farmer spending New Year's Eve guarding the manure pit, a hardworking individual who bears all hardships without complaint. Isn't this just like our fathers who sacrifice themselves for their children? The vivid portrayal, including the round pen on the ear, the oily big tea bowl, the cracked and injured thumb from labor and cold, and the dirty nails filled with oil stains, fills the artwork with a strong sense of realism and notable symbolism. It has evoked concerns and awakenings among the Chinese people regarding the fate of the nation and the future of the ethnic group. Another artist, Chen Danqing, a graduate of the Central Academy of Fine Arts, created a series of Tibetan group paintings, depicting the poetic lives of the mysterious Tibetan plateau herdsmen. This was the first concentrated artistic representation of ethnic customs in border areas by artists after the end of the Cultural Revolution. Due to his solid life experiences and strong sculptural abilities, Chen Danqing's works like "Entering the City" and "Kangba Hanzi" exude a strong ethnic flavor and profound humanistic spirit. Unlike the obvious socialist realist tendencies found in his earlier work "Tears Drench the Harvest Fields," the Tibetan group paintings reveal Chen Danqing's fascination with



19th-century French naturalism. The simple and unadorned figures, rustic stylization, and slightly nostalgic color tones pay homage to artists such as Courbet and Millet. Chen Danqing's paintings awaken the poetic longing deep within people's hearts and have inspired the enduring creativity of minority-themed paintings that followed.

### (3) "New Classical Realism"

Jin Shangyi, once an important figure in socialist realism oil painting, proactively shifted his focus in the late 1970s and embarked on his exploration of new classical realism oil painting. Along with achieving fruitful creative results, he successfully nurtured a group of outstanding realistic painters such as Yang Feiyun and Wang Yidong, contributing to a small upsurge of Chinese neoclassicism in the 1980s and 1990s. Jin Shangyi, a product of the "Horse Training Class," possessed both solid technical skills and creative abilities. He had a strong foundation in realism and rich life experiences, having created classic socialist realism oil paintings like "Chairman Mao at the December Conference" and "Climbing Mustag Peak." However, in the late 1970s, Jin Shangyi, who was inherently reflective, keenly perceived the crisis of socialist realism and proactively established his own territory in new classical realism oil painting. In the oil painting "You Handle It, I Rest Assured," which embodies a typical political theme, Jin Shangyi deviated from the style of socialist realism and seamlessly incorporated the realistic techniques of Western classicism. His subsequent works, such as "Tajik Bride" and "Young Singer," became representative works of Jin Shangyi's academic neoclassical realistic style. Although he made significant contributions to the creation and teaching of realistic oil painting, Jin Shangyi did not believe that his oil painting fundamentally resolved the developmental direction issue of Chinese realistic oil painting. As his disciple Yang Feiyun said, "In our country's development of oil painting, there has been considerable focus on Impressionism, Photorealism, and especially Realism, but there has been very little exposure to classical painting, which represents a significant gap in our oil painting growth." He further actively studied the language of realistic oil painting and, led by figures like Yang Feiyun and Wang Yidong, the "Realist School," they resolutely carried the banner of realism in the name of realism in the new era.

It can even be said that without the efforts of neoclassicism and the Realist School, the fate of realism today would have been even more arduous, and the reemergence of major historical themes and revolutionary realism painting may not have occurred. New classical realism is not an innovation of European classicism; it is merely a concept of the new era, essentially a combination of classical techniques and realistic subjects, a rectification of the "85 New Wave" painting. Thanks to their efforts, Chinese realistic oil painting has persevered amidst the clamor of various modernist trends and encountered a turning point in the new century, radiating with vitality once again.

In addition to the aforementioned "scar art," local painting styles, "poetic realism," and neoclassical painting, there is another group of artists who take it upon themselves to depict history and reality with solemnity and solemnity, known as serious realism. Xu Mangyao, a Chinese Academy of Fine Arts teacher who returned to China after studying in Belgium, Guang Tingbo from the Northeast Violet Painting Society, and Chen Yiming from Shanghai, actively explore the values and significance of the new era using the techniques of realism. For example, Guang Tingbo's "Steel and Sweat" depicts the hard work and indomitable spirit of laborers through hyperrealistic techniques. Chen Yiming combines realism with montage to showcase personal growth and experiences in life. Xu Mangyao's "My Dream" series exhibits both artistic ambiguity and the solemnity of history and reality, breaking free from the constraints of reality and pursuing the fantasy of freedom. It has a strong spiritual direction and is known as serious realism.

Overall, since the 1980s, there has been a reflection and critique of previous ideologies in oil painting. However, it is not a betrayal of realism itself, but a correction of the path of realism. The various styles that emerged during this period were essentially a continuation or return to realism. The criticism of socialist realism in the global context for a period of time, as well as the inspiration and reference that contemporary Chinese oil painting drew from the Russian and Soviet paths, were actually a process of self-healing and redemption for Chinese oil painting. For a period of time, under the strong propaganda of the Hegelian school, national identity and the

spirit of the times became a deafening "scream," drowning out other voices and imposing strict constraints on artists, allowing only a few styles to be heard. This abnormal artistic pattern. Of course, from the perspective of the function of art rather than the spirit of the times and national identity, we can better analyze some confusing issues. Sometimes it is not national identity that dominates everything, but rather a process in which one taste and standard replace another taste and standard. Otherwise, we cannot explain why Huang Quan and Xu Xi, who share the same national identity and belong to the Song Dynasty, have different painting styles such as "Royal Riches and Honors" and "Xu Family's Wildness."

#### 4.5.2 The Inheritance of Realistic Oil Painting

After experiencing various modernist movements, the Chinese people gradually tended towards rationality. Although the various modernist trends that had their heyday brought about a certain impact on ideas and liberated people's thinking to some extent, Chinese modernist painting did not deeply explore the inherent revolutionary and creative spirit of modernist painting. Instead, it followed the footsteps of the West without truly establishing its own characteristics. Unlike early 20th-century Russia, which developed Constructivism and Suprematism at the forefront of the world based on the development of realism and socialist realism, Chinese modernist painting did not emerge from the shadow of the West. At most, it was an ideological attempt that failed to provide the people with a spiritual feast of painting in practical terms. It is important for people to realize that the century-long tradition of Western modernism cannot be learned overnight, nor can its artistic heights be easily reached. Instead, it mostly resulted in mimicry. People discovered that replacing realism with modernist painting was not realistic. Each had its own social foundation, aesthetic guidance, and audience, and they did not necessarily identify with or even mock each other. Different people have diverse needs, and various forms of modernist and traditional realist painting should both be part of human culture. As various forms of modernism took turns to take the stage, many people began to miss and pay attention to realism, calling for the return of realist painting.

From the perspective of artistic development, realist painting, which has been evolving for over a hundred years, also requires refinement and progress. However, it cannot simply vanish due to a prolonged modernist movement in China. Even in Western Europe, the birthplace of modernism, realism still maintains a strong popular base. Realist painting continues to have a presence in museums, art galleries, exhibitions, and various competitions. Realism's vivid imagery, close connection to nature and everyday life, and its accessibility without the need for serious philosophical interpretation make it easily recognized and supported by the public. Its down-to-earth artistic principles, distinct artistic pursuits, and enduring vitality allow it to survive in a competitive environment. With the development of the situation, realism will gradually revive and once again demonstrate its lasting vitality.

For realist painting, in addition to its inherent artistic qualities, the efforts and persistence of the artistic community are crucial. Since the beginning of the new century, the thematic discussions on realist painting organized by the magazine "Fine Arts" have sparked renewed interest in realism. In 2005, the large retrospective exhibition "Studying Abroad in the Soviet Union" held at the China National Art Museum provided an opportunity for people to appreciate the charm and style of realism in the oil paintings of the older generation of artists who studied in the Soviet Union. It allowed the older generation to relive those passionate and golden years. The theoretical preparations, coupled with the annual academic exhibitions representing realism by the "Chinese Realist Painting School," and the remarkable success of realistic realism in important exhibitions such as the National Art Exhibition held every five years, have laid a solid foundation for the revival of realist oil painting in both theory and practice.

## **5. Discussion & Conclusion**

### **5.1 Discussion**

In order to better promote the great achievements of Chinese civilization and commemorate the outstanding contributions made by revolutionary martyrs for national liberation and rejuvenation,

the country initiated major projects focusing on historical and revolutionary themes since the end of the previous century. Among these projects, large-scale and durable oil paintings played an important role. With the strengthening of the country's economic power and a significant increase in policy support and financial assistance, remarkable changes have taken place in recent years.

On one hand, relevant departments nationwide have been soliciting, selecting, and funding artists to participate in major projects centered around historical and revolutionary themes. The selected authors and institutions have better material conditions and concentrated energy to create grand realistic masterpieces reflecting history and revolution. On the other hand, the nation has appropriately tilted exhibition evaluations towards realistic artworks that reflect history, revolution, and the spirit of the times, as well as promote positive energy. As a result, a series of excellent realistic oil paintings depicting revolutionary figures and historical events have emerged, providing confidence for the revival of realistic art.

In recent years, within the framework of the national art funding programs, aside from projects focused on intangible cultural heritage preservation, there has been a higher approval rate for training programs and individual creative projects in realistic oil painting. This further enhances the financial support and spiritual encouragement for the revival and development of realistic oil painting. It can be said that until now, both the momentum generated by public opinion and the achievements in artistic creation have created favorable conditions and opportunities for realistic oil painting.

## **5.2 Conclusion**

After undergoing complex and introspective development phases, contemporary oil painting in China and Russia has gradually entered a relatively mature and harmonious period of connotative growth. It has shifted from being noisy and full of slogans to a stage of contemplation and exploration. It should be noted that in the past, Russian and Soviet oil painting art and creative ideas profoundly

influenced China, while China made little contribution to the development of Russian and Soviet painting before the 20th century. The development of Russian and Soviet oil painting was ahead of us, providing tremendous assistance, valuable experiences, and lessons for us. Seizing the opportunities in the new era, we have witnessed the positive development of Chinese oil painting.

Today, Chinese oil painting has gained recognition and respect worldwide, and it has also had an impact on the development of world oil painting, including contemporary Russia. Elements such as freehand brushwork, ethereal quality, and artistic conception from Chinese painting have become important languages in the works of many international master painters. Chinese oil painting has successfully moved away from passively imitating others' experiences and paths and has embarked on a path of oil painting development with Chinese characteristics, integrating its own features and advantages while drawing on the strengths of others. The experience and consensus gained from a century of development and changes in Chinese oil painting emphasize the importance of openness, innovation, and learning from others in order to progress.

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