

# Exploration of Life Itself: Shape and Colors of Chang Yu's Paintings

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## Abstract

Chang Yu belongs to the "East-meets-West" group of artists. Chinese artists studying in Europe in the 20th century, like Xu Beihong and Lin Fengmian, stressed the transformation of Chinese painting through western methods and breaking new ground in Chinese painting. Chang Yu took a different approach. He was committed to the innovation of western painting through traditional Chinese painting techniques and aesthetic taste. In other words, he attempted to make westerners accept Chinese oil paintings with the language of traditional Chinese painting but with a contemporary style-embodiment of Oriental purity, simplicity and elegance.

## Keywords

Chang Yu; Modernity; Integration of Chinese and Western Elements; Colors.

## 1. Introduction

The analysis of the subject matter and the ink colors found in Chang Yu's works at different stages, this paper highlights how he became an indispensable bridge between Chinese and Western culture by integrating Chinese style lines and ink colors with the outlook on colors and space-time from the western art world. In these media, there are endless topics of human aesthetic creation and continuous exploration of the individual's existence and life itself.

## 2. Organization of the Text

### 2.1. Chang Yu at the Stage of Studying Abroad

#### 2.1.1. Stage of Artistic Career

Chang Yu (1900-1966) was among the first group of Chinese painters that studied in France in the 20th century through a work-study program. Because he settled in France to pursue his career, he was forgotten at home and died in loneliness and poverty. Unexpectedly, he rose to fame in his homeland and abroad 30 years after his death. The price of his works soared and set new auction records for oil paintings by a Chinese. This begs the question: What are the characteristics and artistic values of his artistic creation?

Chang Yu arrived in Paris in 1919. Those studying in France in the same period included Xu Beihong and Lin Fengmian; in the later years, there were Pan Yuliang, Pang Xunqin, and others. Unlike his contemporaries, Chang Yu painted out of his own disposition and feelings. So he wasn't admitted into the public academy of fine arts for training in a systematic manner like most foreign students but chose to study on his own at the private Académie de la Grande Chaumière and immersed himself in the daily life of Paris to observe and experience. Meanwhile, he pursued his artistic vision in galleries, salons and museums and through friendships.

Despite some ups and downs, Chang Yu's artistic life in France was relatively straightforward. The year 1940 roughly divides his life into two periods: During the first period, he lived a light-hearted and unrestrained life as a popular playboy in art circles, and he was on the verge of

success; however, he suffered from poverty and loneliness in the second period, with his works becoming mature and illustrating more distinct personal characteristics.

### 2.1.2. The Influence of Western Modernism

When Chang Yu and others stayed in France, Paris, which had just experienced the First World War, was still a global center of art. The pioneers of the early 20th-century movements in modern art – the Fauvists, Cubists, and German Expressionists – were already established and influential schools of painting. During the same period and after came the Futurist, Dadaist, Abstractionist and Surrealist movements. In addition, there was the Paris School—a collective term for innovative young artists from different countries living in Paris from the 1910s to 1930s, who mainly gathered at Montmartre, RiveGauche Quartier Latin and Montparnasse. Chang Yu, a member of the School of Paris, settled at Montparnasse in Paris. Because the Academic grande Chaumiere was also located there, opportunities were plenty to befriend many artists, familiarize himself with modern artistic trends in Paris and experience a variety of new school works. Mr. Shui Tianzhong also noticed this. He thought that “Since the 1920s, Chang Yu has been exploring the simplification of painting forms. He employed implicative, soft and simple colors in his oil paintings. He not only used brushes for sketches, but also often sketched expressive lines on oil paintings, sometimes carving concise, thin lines on thick layers of oil color.”[1].

Chang Yu was not a person who indiscriminately adopted western things; on the contrary, he would make choices based on his ideals, foundation and strengths to form a distinct style. His artistic world was simple, focusing on the female human body, flowers and animals. His style is consistent and traceable and can be summarized as the “pink period” (1919-1940) and “black period” (1941-1966). Although he dabbled in many fields like ink and wash, watercolors and print, his main achievements were centered on drawings, oil paintings and sculpture.

### 2.1.3. The Formation of Chang Yu's Painting Style

In the 1920s, Chang Yu's studies and experiments were quite fortunate and refined. He tried to sketch with a brush, combining his training in modern sketching techniques with experiments in new painting methods. He drew the lines with the familiar writing brush first and then applied colors simply with a charcoal pencil, ink and wash or watercolors to paint the human body, presenting a highly refined, simplified and ethereal line drawing style. The result was that his paintings had both the exaggerated deformation and planar characteristics belonging to western modernism and the charm of ink and wash found in Oriental paintings. The claim that he was consummate refers to the fact that he made enormous efforts in observing and depicting the female human body. He absorbed modernist skills and combined them with distorted photographic images and his own temperament and interest. By the latter half of the 1920s, he entered a realm of doing whatever he wanted and began introducing color and expanding the scope of his subject matter.

In the late 1920s, Chang Yu expanded his subject matter to animals and flowers from the female human body, and his style showed distinct characteristics of the “pink period.” The sketches of the female human body continued the tone of smooth lines and exaggerated buttocks and legs, often with an elongated body length. These characteristics could be found in his oil paintings of the same period. However, the images in those oil paintings—be they the human body, animals or flowers—were all minimalist, simple, flat and ornamental. The contour lines were intentionally weakened and thinned with a sense of rhythm. The colors Chang used were primarily pink, white and a little black. The subject or background of the picture was mainly pink, showing sincere feelings and containing the elements of pastel softness, romance and gentleness. Some scholars compared him as a painter with the poets Shao Xunmei and Xu Zhimo: “The carnal human body, with its lively lines and flamboyant colors, is like a laudable woman. It is almost comparable to the depiction of women stirring with imagination in Shao Xunmei's

poetry and Xu Zhimo's novels. Those scenes of radical catharsis and excitement are a synthesis of decadence and symbolism." [2] They demonstrated Chang Yu's pure, aesthetic and optimistic inner world. From his paintings, people can feel an obvious oriental aura, which is particularly distinct in the artworks featuring flowers or animals. China's folk patterns or amulets were often found in the backgrounds and carpets of his works, enhancing the picture's richness and mystique. During this period, Chang Yu began to expand the field of his artistic creation by transplanting mature themes and images into the prints or sculptures .

## **2.2. The Artistic Characteristics of Chang Yu's Painting**

### **2.2.1. Painting Theme**

Generally speaking, most of Chang Yu's body paintings were recreated from the sketches of models. They had no particular thematic implied meaning; the primary purpose was to express his peculiar sensitivity for and interest in the beauty of the female human body. He once said to poet Xu Zhimo, "I cannot live one single day without a nude woman standing in front of me to satisfy and comfort my 'visual lust.'" "The original motivation for me to learn painting is just a bit curiosity for the secret of the human body...When it comes to the distribution of beauty on the human body, it is an extremely mysterious phenomenon...For this aesthetic instinct possessed by an artist, I should thank God with my eyes closed." His love for the female human body was almost a kind of infatuation and worship, and its expression must be pure and clean and, of course, rich in personal interest and subjective spiritual expression.

His flower or animal paintings didn't show strong characteristics of sketches because they were full of imagination and expressive force. These paintings often showed subtle self-comparison symbols to express the author's situation and mental state. His flower paintings mainly came in three forms-the potted flower, bottled flower and floral basket, with noticeable flatness and decorative features. The flower paintings during the "pink period" had unfolded sprays converging upward or parting to the right and left. Having more blank spaces, they expressed the idea of blooming, vigor and prosperity . His animal paintings often featured horses, leopards, elephants, cats, dogs and other animals. In most cases, it was a single animal occupying a small proportion of the picture , implying loneliness and insignificance. However, the images of the animals during this period were plump and gentle, having a joyous, serene and tranquil demeanor.

### **2.2.2. Black Period**

Chang Yu's life entered a period of poverty after 1940, and his work also entered a "black period." Nevertheless, his works did not directly express the chaos caused by war and the suffering around him. His art was only immersed in his own world. The subject matter of his paintings remained unchanged in the "black period," with a style showing some change. Lines were heavy and terse, simple yet eye-catching in shape and solemn in colors showing a sharp contrast. The general tone of the works was black , blackish green, dark blue, iron red or maroon. The connotations of the pictures changed from cheerful and relaxed, free and easy, to somber and despondent, lonely and aloof.

More fabricated elements were found in the flower paintings of this period. People could even spot many "unreasonable" and "abnormal" phenomena, e.g., blue branches and leaves , the branch having a right angle and single plant bearing different flowers and fruits . Moreover, plants were disproportionately larger than the pot (vase) in most cases. It seemed that the pot couldn't support the plant at all. However, the flowering branches seem unbending and proud by nature, a portrayal of the author's mental state. The animals in the animal paintings were smaller than those in the "pink period," and their movements also betrayed their uneasiness . The pictures presented a clearer sense of vastness, loneliness and detachment, seemingly a metaphor for Chang Yu's plight. Only the human body paintings kept his consistent taste-filled with serene and pure beauty. This style reached a climax in the 1950s, with simple and elegant

figures, simple and beautiful forms, and high and beautiful taste. Although the characteristics of plump hips and legs continued, the phenomenon of elongated human bodies nearly disappeared. Heavy and thick lines sketched the contours of a succinct or exaggerated female human body. The contrast of painted colors highlights the charm peculiar to the human body. Compared with his contemporary Chinese painters living in Europe, Chang Yu's painting style and its characteristics were distinctive, even "iconic." Though Xu Beihong absorbed the impressionist skills and techniques and Lin Fengmian was influenced by symbolism and fauvism, Chang Yu's simplicity, flatness, exaggeration, "neither overly polishing, nor deliberate decoration, it is natural and appropriate with inborn aesthetic implications", [3] and ornamentation in his paintings eclipsed his peers and embraced the cutting edge of modern art.

### 2.2.3. Artist's Self Portrait

Chang Yu seldom talked about his art, but he was clear about his artistic positioning and situation. He once made the following remarks when interviewed by a French art critic in 1946: "European paintings can be compared to a sumptuous feast offering many roast and fried foods and assorted meats. My works are vegetables, fruits and salads, which can help people to change people's taste in appreciating fine arts. Contemporary painters always draw pictures with many colors, which is a bit fraudulent. I would not do such a thing, so I am one of the painters not accepted by these people." He once said, "I have got nothing in my life, and I am only a painter. As to my works, I think they need no explanations at all. When watching my works, the viewers should understand clearly that what I want to convey...is only a simple concept." This "concept" is his genuine disposition, namely his nature. Therefore we know that Chang Yu's behavior and art are neither an affectation nor a purposeful choice but pure products of his natural innocence and composure.

## 3. Conclusion

In summary, Chang Yu is recognized in contemporary times not for his unruly behavior and descent into poverty or his artistic choice to evade reality, but for the striking achievements he made in the creative exploration of "creation from a Chinese perspective in Western style." It is precisely for this reason that he was the purest artist of his time, and his works' artistic value and significance are growing in recognition today. This "East-meets-West" style, which is different from others, is particularly pioneering and exemplary in today's world of cultural diversity and cross-cultural fusion. As a result, it received due respect and historical recognition following his death.

## References

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