
Differences between Chinese and Western Art Thoughts

Comparing “The Thinker” by French sculptor Auguste Rodin (1840-1917) and the Pensive Bodhisattva statue from China’s Northern Wei Dynasty (386-534), we find that they are widely different in their appearance – the former has a tense expression on his face while the latter is carefree and leisurely. “The Thinker” seems in stress, with muscles tightening up, particularly muscles in the lower legs. Easterners might wonder whether it is necessary to wrestle with his thoughts in order to capture truth, since “too much water drowned the miller”.

The Pensive Bodhisattva looks much calmer, cross-legged, leaning his head upon his hand, and showing a delighted smile after complete enlightenment. I presume that the two statues reflect the essential differences between Chinese and Western art thoughts from a certain angle.

In Western drawings, an angel always has a pair of wings, as Westerners think concretely, believing that angels need wings to fly, like birds. In Chinese paintings, an immortal usually rides a cloud, which is more abstract and convenient than flapping wings.

Western paintings, either portraits, still lifes or landscapes, have a realistic style and honor nature’s details. For example, a Western landscape usually has a proper scale and true-to-life light and color. Put in a picture frame on a wall, the painting looks like a view through a window.

Chinese paintings aim beyond a corner of nature. For example, a Chinese landscape usually offers a panoramic view of mountains, rivers, trees and clouds, which can be seen in the long landscape scrolls from the Northern Song Dynasty (960-1127) and the small landscapes from the Southern Song Dynasty (1127-1279). Chinese arts prefer panoramic scenes while Western arts value details, which finds expression in the

mounting of paintings.

Western artists think practically and analyze details. “The Thinker”, an anatomical sculpture, is a very proof of Western thinking. Chinese artists adopt a holistic view. In traditional Chinese landscapes, everything under Heaven is presented on a single scroll. Western philosophers, including English philosopher Francis Bacon (1561-1626), advocate to conquer nature, believing that nature is the most cunning being that will only confess under torture. Chinese philosophers are contented with living in harmony with nature. Northern Song philosopher Zhang Zai (1020-1077) said, “All beings between Heaven and Earth are equals of humans.” Contemporary historian Qian Mu (1895-1990) concluded, “Western philosophy takes one step forward while Chinese philosophy takes one step back.”

Thinking aggressively, humanity has to confront, conquer, harness and analyze nature. Thinking inclusively, humanity in harmony with Heaven and Earth enjoys a broader prospect. This is why Western artists pursue only excellent craftsmanship while Chinese artists aspire to moral perfection in addition to art achievements. Ming Dynasty painter and calligrapher Wen Zhengming (1470-1559) said, “A morally defective painter cannot paint properly.” It is difficult for Westerners to understand, as they believe that expertise and character are not necessarily related. However, the Chinese have a different demand for artistic creation, taking techniques and ethics as a whole.