Wen Shu: The Expression of Life Theme from the Perspective of Women

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Introduction

In the family of Wen Chu (1595-1634) , all the men (such as Wen Zhengming, Wen Peng, Wen Jia) painted landscapes, a tradition that has been passed down through the generations. However, Wen Chu is not interested in landscape, she chose the vivid life of flowers, plants, birds and insects as the subject of her paintings, with the support of her father, Wen Congjian, she opened up a new path, opened up a new world of their own.

In addition to good family education, Wen Chu's success is also inseparable from her own efforts and creative attitude. She has painted two large-scale picture albums, each with more than a thousand pictures, namely "Golden Stone Insects and Grass and Trees" and "Cold Mountain Grass and Trees and Insects". The earliest work we know of Wen Chu is "Golden Stone Insect Grass and Trees" completed by her at the age of 23-26 (1617-1620) over four years. The picture is now in the collection of the National Central Library in Taipei and is a painted manuscript. In addition to flowers, birds, insects and butterflies, the contents of this album are divided into 10 parts: jade, grass, wood, animal, poultry, insect, fruit, rice, vegetable and others. Zhao Lingjun said in the preface: "The picture here began in 1617, and it took a thousand days to get a large number of volumes." It can be seen that Wen Chu copied with great concentration and attentiveness.

In terms of subject matter, the flowers painted by Wen Chu are not common garden plants in life, but selected some well-known flowers and plants seldom depicted by artists, such as day lily, poppy flower and lesser-known flowers. In the composition, she only selects one or two flowers that stretch or curl. Instead of overlapping and interspersing, she uses stones, insects and butterflies to highlight the quiet atmosphere of flowers. In the brush, she uses light color rendering or fine brush outline, according to the object of the performance of each need. From the materials, composition and expression of the painting, we can see that Wen Chu pursues to reappear the original appearance in "Cold Mountain Grass and Trees and Insects", which shows the female painter's gentle and elegant atmosphere of the boudoir.

The drawing of this picture book has a profound influence on the later stage of Wen Chu's works. From the main plant of the picture, we can see that the author pays more attention to the detail features of the plants, so that the viewers can identify the plants in real life through the atlas.

Regarding "Cold Mountain Grass and Trees and Insects", Qian Qianyi's "Zhao Lingjun Epitaph" and Zhang Geng's "Continued Records of Chinese Painting Collection" have records:

"With good appearance and intelligent nature, she (Wen Chu) can freely write about flowers, insects and butterflies, and express her temperament and vitality. 'Grass, Trees, and Insects of Cold Mountain' includes thousands of herbaceous images she describes, which took thousands of days to complete. Wen Chu is good at depicting flowers, birds, grass and insects, and once made 100 kinds of plants and insects in Cold Mountain. She can also depict trees and rocks with the powerful writing style." (端容性明惠，所见幽花异卉，小虫怪蝶，信笔渲染，皆能橅写性情，鲜妍生动，图得千种，名曰《寒山草木昆虫状》，摹内府本草千种，千日而就。文俶善花鸟草虫，尝作寒山草木昆虫百种，曲肖物情，亦能写苍松怪石，笔颇老劲。)

After marrying Zhao Lingjun, Wen Chu followed her husband to live a life like a paradise in cold mountain, just outside Gusu. The scenery of cold mountain changes in four seasons, and the grass, trees, flowers and birds become Wen Chu's endless creative materials. The tranquil rhythm of life provides a good creative environment for Wen Chu. The sketch of plants, trees and insects in Cold Mountain district by Wen Chu after marriage is likely to be the content of this book. Cold Mountain is located in the south of the Yangtze River and is suitable for plant growth. Zhao Lingjun said in the preface of "Golden Stone Insects and Grass and Trees", "Cold Mountain has has four distinct seasons in spring, summer, autumn and winter, and beautiful valleys and rocks. There are too many wonders in the mountains, so she drew a copy of 'Plants, Trees, Insects, and Fishes' in the mountains as a sequel." It can be seen that "Grass, Trees, and Insects of Cold Mountain" should be created after "Golden Stone Insects and Grass and Trees", after copying thousands of works. Wen Chu has mastered the writing and painting techniques of various themes, and gradually understood the growth rules of plants and flowers through the observation of real objects. As Wang Keyu said in Coral Web:

"The flowers, insects, and butterflies that she saw can be described and rendered with pen, and they can be described in a sentimental, bright and vivid manner." (所见幽花异卉、小虫怪蝶，信笔渲染皆能抚写性情，鲜妍生动。)

In the Palace Museum, there is a "Flower Atlas" with octavo, which depicts flowers such as begonia, dianthus, wild chrysanthemum, and gladiolus. In addition to individual flowers, some also use lake rocks and white butterflies as a support. The composition of each work is different, and the

layout is unique. The branches, leaves, and petals of the flowers are dyed with color directly, and the outer contour is not outlined. The veins of the leaves are outlined with thin lines, the colors are gorgeous and elegant. The use of brush and ink is also very particular. The flowers and leaves of the wild chrysanthemum are outlined with thin lines, and the rocks are smudged with a thick brush with light ink. Then the structure of the stone is outlined with thick ink, and the outline is slightly outlined with coke ink. The texture of the soft flowers and the hard lake rocks forms a contrast, adds interest and enriches the visual experience of the picture. In the selection of scenery, Wen Chu selected only two or three of each kind of flowers, which was related to her study of the book "Golden Stone Insects and Grass and Trees". In addition, she also selected some flowers, insects and butterflies that are not common to people, and carefully represented the different shapes and forms of flowers and leaves. Wen Chu deliberately reduces the overlap and interchange of flowers and leaves, with light color, showing the unique tenderness, delicacy, clean and simple of female painters.

In the "Flower Painting", there are the inscription seal and the positive seal of Wen Chu, as well as her inscription "February 1631, Wen Chu painting." From this we know that the "Flower Painting" was painted by Wen Chu in 1631 when she was 36 years old. Most of Wen Chu's paintings are only stamped or dated, and have no poems. From this, it can be inferred that the purpose of Wen Chu is not for entertainment and sale, but should be self-pasture.

There are currently more than 30 known Wen Chu painting works. In addition to the above-mentioned works, there are also the "Spring Nibbling on Leaves" collected by the National Palace Museum in Taipei, the "Plum Blossom Picture" axis, "Flowers, Butterflies, Grasses and Insects Album" collected by the Shanghai Museum, "Pomegranate Flower Picture", "Golden Day Flower Picture" fan, "Day Stone Picture", "Flower Butterfly Picture" fan, "Orchid Stone Picture" fan, "Ink Plum Picture" fan, "Poppy Butterfly Picture" Fan, "Flower and Butterfly Picture Album" from the Liaoning Provincial Museum, "Poppy Flower Picture" from the Guizhou Provincial Museum, "Poppy Flower Picture" from the Guangdong Provincial Museum, etc. Wen Chu is fond of depicting hemerocallis, poppies and black plum blossom. These flowers are easy to grow, easy to observe and sketch, and they also have beautiful symbolic meanings, such as hemerocallis, also known as lotos, in the story of plants that pregnant women wear this flower will give birth to a boy. The Book of Songs also recorded a related legend: Hemerocallis grows in the northern end of the square, which is where the women live, and these plants have been associated with women. The fruit of the poppy flower is spherical, filled with small seeds, and it, like the pomegranate, is regarded as a symbol of fertility. In addition to its elegant and refined temperament, black plum blossom's five petals represent happiness, longevity, peace, success, known as auspicious flowers. Wen Chu and Zhao Lingjun have a daughter, also adopted nephew Zhao Kun as an adopted son. Wen Chu reposes the wish of giving birth to children through the beautiful implication of many children and auspi-

ciousness in flowers, in order to make up for her regret that she failed to carry on the family line.

After copying the works of male painters, most female painters in the Ming Dynasty gradually converged to the concepts and techniques of male paintings, but there were few works with “Feminism” and “Female concept” in terms of the themes of their works.

Qiu Zhu, a female painter in the Ming Dynasty, studied painting with her father, Qiu Ying, when she was a child. Her works are mainly figure paintings, supplemented by landscapes, flowers, birds and pavilions. She is good at depicting scenes and Guan Yin images of People’s stories. For example, in the “Female Music Painting”, which is now hidden in the Palace Museum in Beijing, the straight and powerful lines depict the solemnity of the palace, which contrasts with the elegant lines of the palace maids. In addition, the colors used in the painting are green and red, blending warm and cool colors, gaudy and not vulgar, without the spirit of kitsch impetuous. The koros of the palace has the pattern of plot, the color of the red dress and the green mountain stone, which is quite similar to Qiu Ying’s “Royal Concubine’s Dressing”, “Spring Morning in the Han Palace”. From the existing works can be seen Qiu Zhu’s brush and ink techniques and painting themes, both inherited from her father Qiu Ying’s artistic ideas. Most of her paintings are of exquisite brushwork and elegant lines, and she became one of the few female painters who were good at painting figures in the Ming dynasty.

Both Wen Chu and Qiu Zhu were famous scholars of the Wu School and were later classified as famous ladies of the Ming dynasty. From the point of view of learning painting, Wen Chu and Qiu Zhu both originated from the family, tracing the ancient paintings of past masters. But because of the specificity of the subject matter and the seclusion of the living environment, Wen Chu painted a large number of flowers, birds, insects and butterflies, through close and true observation repeatedly, her paintings are very detailed and vivid. According to the composition of the picture, Qiu Zhu inherited her father’s idea of composition, taking characters, buildings and mountains and rocks as the main content of the picture. In the color aspect, Qiu Zhu is mainly green and heavy color, and the color tone is thick and thick, while Wen Chu dyes the petals directly and sketches the branches with fine lines, which comes from her early imitation experience. In terms of the choice of theme, Qiu Zhu inherited her father’s figure painting theme, while Wen Chu did not inherit the landscape theme of her ancestors. Instead, she chose the flowers, plants, insects and butterflies that she was interested in, declaring her special appeal as a woman.

Ma Shouzhen (1548-1604) , a famous courtesan painter in the Ming Dynasty, studied painting mainly under the guidance of male literatis because of her special social status. He was one of Ma Shouzhen’s closest associates, and at the age of twenty-one he studied under Wen Zhengming, who had a strong influence on his poetry and culture. The “Bamboo Stone Map” made by Ma Shouzhen

in 1604 is currently in the Beijing Palace Museum, comparing it with Wen Zhengming's: First, the two pictures are long volume, the composition is very similar, and in the picture the upper part is made of three sets of orchid leaves, and the intermediate portion is from top to bottom, which is growing in the stone gap, and the dynamics of the orchid leaves are very similar. What is different is that Ma Shouzhen's paintings are set off by small strokes of bamboo, while Wen Zhengming's orchid leaves are all painted in ink. The atmosphere of the paintings is even thicker and more magnificent, showing the strong vitality of the orchid.

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According to the birth and death of Wen Zhengming and the mature period of Ma Shouzhen's painting style, it can be concluded that the two had no contact, so the most likely influence on Ma Shouzhen's painting style is Wen Zhengming's disciple Wang Zhideng. The elegant and wild orchids in Ma Shouzhen's works are closer to the flower art of "Wu School" of painting.

Wen Chu was more creative in painting than most of the female painters of her time. She did not attach herself to the male's painting ideas and techniques, but found her own artistic language by copying and sketching.

Wen Chu's flower works are exquisite, elegant and interesting, and were highly sought after by the aristocracy of that time. Her painting style was popular throughout the south of the Yangtze River: Huang Rou, Luo Qilan and Wang Yuyan of Jiangsu all studied Wen Yang's painting style; Wen Qingyu was originally surnamed Gao, however, she changed her surname because of the worship of Wen Chu, and Lu Xichen of Changshu was called "the reincarnation of Wen Chu" because his painting style was very similar to that of Wen Chu. Among the numerous female disciples, the sisters Zhou Shuhu and Zhou Shuxi of Jiangsu have made the most achievements, and they are also recorded in the history of painting in "Yutai Painting History".

In the Second Sex, Simone de Beauvoir says, "Women have more personal experience than men of the past, of death, of the passage of time. They can easily describe their inner life, experience and heaven and Earth." Wen Chu found her exquisite painting language in painting creation, with this unique female perspective, she interprets the female world. Wen Chu was not interested in grand political, philosophical, or historical subjects, but she had a rich and delicate emotional experience of the unique personal experiences of family life, opening up spiritual and perceptual realms beyond the reach of male artists.