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An Analysis of "Elegance" and "Vulgarity" in Art Appreciation

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Abstract: *"Elegance" and "vulgarity" are often mentioned in art appreciation. To analyze the connotation of "elegance" and "vulgarity" and to discuss the relationship between "elegance" and "vulgarity" on this basis is of certain practical significance and contemporary value for establishing the correct view of "elegance and vulgarity" in art appreciation.*

Keywords: *Elegance and vulgarity; The connotation; Art appreciation*

Appreciation of both refined and popular tastes has always been the value pursuit of literati engaged in artistic creation, which not only runs through the history of the artistic works, but also blends in the appreciation of artistic works. Jiang Yi said in *Refinement and Popularity of Chinese Painting*, "Elegance and vulgarity are one of the criteria for evaluating human equity and painting in traditional Chinese culture. They are not only the concept of character, but also the mode of behavior." Indeed, the level of a person's style will not only have a specific impact on his artistic aesthetics, but also reflect in his aesthetic activities.

The State of the Study of "Elegance" and "Vulgarity"

In Chinese art, especially in the field of Chinese literature and art, scholars often pay attention to the question of elegance and vulgarity. There are articles devoted to elegance and vulgarity. In the field of painting, for example *Refinement and Popularity of Chinese Painting* by Jiang Yi. This paper expounds the fusion relationship between elegance and vulgarity from three aspects: the evolution of refined and vulgar view, the secular interest of literati and painters in Ming and Qing Dynasties, and the mutual penetration of literati art and folk art. *Elegance and Vulgarity in the Style of Chinese Traditional Painting* by Tang Chao. This paper analyzes the relationship between elegance and vulgarity, as well as the process of their unification from opposition. In the field of literature, for example *Jin Yong: The Myth of Both Refined and Popular Tastes* by Wang Binbin, *On Elegance and Vulgarity in The History of Chinese Calligraphy* by Chen Yongzheng. In the field of painting, there are also doctoral dissertations on elegance and vulgarity, such as Zhang Manhua's *Study on Elegance and Vulgarity in Chinese Painting Theory*. The author explains the meaning of "elegant" and "vulgar", and sorts out the evolution of the concept of elegance and vulgarity in the theory of Chinese painting, captures the changeable characteristics of the flow between elegance and vulgarity, and expounds that the confluence of elegance and vulgarity is the historical necessity of artistic aesthetics. There are also books on elegance and vulgarity, such as Zhu Ziqing's *On Appreciation of Elegance and Vulgarity; The Refined and Vulgar Spirit of Chinese Aesthetics* by Li Tiandao. It's worth mentioning in particular that Fan Meiyun listed two chapters, "Secularization tendency in Chinese traditional aesthetics" and "Elegance and vulgarity view in Chinese Traditional aesthetics", in her "*Contemporary Interpretation of Chinese Traditional*

Aesthetics". "Elegant" and "Slang" are specifically discussed in Zhang Hongliang's "*Chinese Beauty Interest*". In addition, *On the Dual Category of Chinese Painting* by Dong Xinbin and Zheng Qi, "Elegance" and "vulgarity" is regarded as the aesthetic category of dialectical unity.

From these, it can be seen that in the fields of literature, aesthetics and calligraphy and painting, people always pay high attention to "elegance and vulgarity" (no matter their connotation or their relationship), and elegance and vulgarity are also hot topics. However, so far, there is still a lack of comprehensive, systematic and in-depth discussion on elegance and vulgarity, especially in the field of painting, there is no systematic combing and research on the occurrence, development and evolution process of elegance and vulgarity.

The Connotation of "Elegant" and "Vulgar"

So, what is "elegant" and "vulgar" after all? Let’s talk about "elegant" at first. *Shuo Wen Jie Zi*, "Crow, crow in the State of Chu, also known as corvids which smaller than crows and whiter underbelly. Qin called it "elegant". The article of "elegance" in Duan Yucai's *Annotation On Shuo Wen Jie Zi* said, "crows in the State of Chu, the crow genus, its name crows in the State of Chu, not the Chu of Jing Chu." From the above two materials, we can know, "elegant" is a pictographic character, the glyph is good, it shows that it originally refers to a kind of bird, this bird people of Qin called "elegant". In the *Great Chinese Dictionary*, the article "Ya" reads, "Notes: this character was often borrowed as the standard, which later became the Chinese character for "crow". *Rhyme*, "Ya, bird name. Shuo Wen, "Chu Wu also, or crows." "Ya" borrowed from "zheng" in the northern and Southern Dynasties. Southern Dynasty Gu Ye Wang *Jade Article*, "elegant is standard." *The Analects of Confucius*, "Zi suo ya yan, Shi, Shu, li are all ya yan. "He Yan's collection quoted Kong Anguo as saying, "Elegant words are standard words." "*Xunzi*", "The second queen of the law is indecent. After extended to "noble, elegant" meaning. The Department of Vocabulary, "Elegance, elegance."

Then there's "vulgar." *Shuo Wen Jie Zi*, "Su means custom." From this we can know that "vulgar" is also a pictographic character, its original meaning is "custom" or "habit". *Shi Ji · Music Book*, "Change customs, the world is peaceful. Zhang Shoujie states, "up is the wind, down is the custom." *The Book of Rites · Qu Li*, "enter the country and ask the custom, enter the house and ask taboos. Zheng Xuan notes, 'The Su's meaning is that what is often done and what is not.'" It was later extended to mean "vulgar or mediocre". *Lü Shi Chun Qiu*, "Lord, common Lord also, insufficient with lift." Gao You notes, "The common Lord, not unworthy, every gentleman." It was also extended to mean "mass or passage." *The Yan's Family Rule · Teach children*, "Popular proverb says, 'Teach your wife when she is a newly wed, train your son when he is still a child, this discourse is true." Buddhism, on the other hand, calls the world or the home as vulgarity, as opposed to becoming a monk. As for "vulgarity, rustic", "popular, ground gas" and so on are also its extended meaning.

The Relationship between "Elegance" and "Vulgarity" in Art Appreciation

In traditional Chinese painting thoughts, the standards of elegance and commonness involve a wide range of aspects. In addition to pure artistic standards, such as painting themes, brush and ink techniques, artistic conception, etc., they often involve the creators' personal morality, cultivation and knowledge, world outlook

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and other contents closely related to philosophical thoughts. For example, Li Gonglin, a painter in the Song Dynasty, is a famous artist of the generation who is widely praised, which is actually derived from his unique charismatic personality. Li Gonglin is romantic, elegant, honest, not attached to powerful people, and has a liberal temperament, which is his "elegance". Such factors outside of pure art are permeated in the subject matter, artistic conception and even the brush and ink techniques of Li Gonglin's paintings. For example, the reason why his famous work *The Picture between the Emperor and the Minister* became the representative of "elegance" work is that its subject praised the political order and moral standards under the feudal system; *The Picture of Li Guang Shot and Chased* has an extraordinary artistic conception, which reflects Li Gonglin's character of ingenuity and not going along with the common people. As the painter himself said, "Let the vulgar as it, as the arrow chase ride."

Of course, since artistic creation itself is often both elegant and vulgar, in art appreciation, we should not only focus on its "elegant", but also take into account its "vulgar". As far as the theory of landscape painting is concerned, Han Zhuo in the Song Dynasty was the first person to raise the issue of "vulgarity". He said in *the Pure Complete Collection of Landscape Painting*, "The disease of painting is common, but the disease of vulgarity is the greatest." The concrete manifestation of "vulgarity" is, "It is a Still painter who only cares about beauty and beauty, but only cares about delicacy and modesty." It is worth noting that we should treat the word "vulgar" dialectically, "vulgar" contains both negative and positive meanings. Xiehe said in *Painting Work*, "However skills have clever and clumsy, art without ancient and modern." Here, "qiao" refers to the delicacy in the form of painting, which is a commendatory term; "Clumsy", on the contrary, refers to the lack of painting skills and is a derogatory term. There are "clever" and "clumsy" in painting, and "clever and clumsy" belong to the category of "vulgar". At the same time, "clever" and "clumsy" are not completely opposite, and there is also a mutual integration between them and the evolution of "elegant". The idiom "Big Qiao if Clumsy" reveals the dialectical relationship between "delicate " and "clumsy".

In addition to "clever and clumsy", "vulgar" in art appreciation also includes "sweet". Huang Zijiu in the Yuan Dynasty first put forward this idea, which is called "the four characters for painting, to get rid of the evil,vulgar,sweet and the lazy." Here "sweet" is presented as the typical form of "vulgar". Shao Meichen said in *Painting Farming's Comment on Drawing*, "Sweet should be avoided as a taboo in painting , sweet is vulgar, sweet is soft, vulgar already unbearable, let alone soft?" Huang Binhong believes that the reason why "sweet" is classified as "vulgar" is because "sweet" here means "no inner beauty". Dong Qichang also said, "It is for the morale to get rid of sweet and vulgar ways." However, here "sweet vulgar" can not be one-sidedly understood as "bright color", which also contains the charming modality, which is often said "fawnishness". As Shen Zongqian said in the Qing Dynasty, "The colors in red green and literary grace are magnificent, and the painting is not lost. What I want to do is a kind of obliquity between pen and ink." It is obvious that Shen Zongqian equates "sweet vulgar" with "fawns" here.

In actual art appreciation, however, some people tend to put the "elegant" and "vulgar" to separate, mistakenly think that boarded the "great hall" is the "elegant", (such as hanging in the palace, exhibits in the showroom), on the other hand, cannot be mounted or hard to walk into great hall is the "common" (such as on street corners.) One of the root causes of this misunderstanding is to interpret "vulgar" as "popular" or even "vulgar". However, just from the perspective of development, even if "vulgar" refers to "popular" or even "vulgar", "elegant" and "vulgar" are not absolutely opposite and fixed, and there is the possibility of mutual

transformation between them. At the same time, different times have different understandings of "elegance" and "vulgarity" based on different aesthetic standards. For example, Bai Juyi, who is famous for his simple and understandable poetry, and Li Bai, who is famous for his gorgeous rhetoric, have totally different styles. However, such difference is only the difference between elegance and popularity, not between good and bad, and it does not affect their being excellent poets at all. The thin gold body of Emperor Huizong of the Song Dynasty was considered beautiful and generous, smart and personal, and praised as an elegant art. However, there are also people for the imitation of this font behavior expressed contempt, with it as vulgar. Many people, for example, enjoy the drama and its elegance, but they may not know that drama was regarded in ancient times as an unrefined thing to be enjoyed by secular people.Therefore, to evaluate the elegance and vulgarity of works of art, we should not only rely on our own preferences, but also combine with the social thoughts of a particular era and refer to the evaluation of others.

Of course, when "vulgarity" in art is reduced to "vulgarity", no matter what kind of art, it basically comes to its end. On this point, Fu Lei mentioned in *Twenty Lectures of World Famous Works of Fine Arts*, "There is an immutable formula in art life: when an art becomes dull and rigid, and can no longer reflect the trend of the times, it must return to nature and draw inspiration from it." Taking Cornielle, Hugo and Michelangelo as examples, "Cornielle, a French tragic writer in the 17th century, achieved his lofty status in the history of modern tragedy because of his heroic and high spirit in his early years. But in his later years this thought inevitably became an extreme and deliberately contrived formula. In his later years, Hugo also had poems full of willful absurdities and fantasies. The spirit of Michelangelo's famous early works became a fixed theory by the time he was over sixty when he painted the Sistine Chapel, *The Last Judgment*." It can be seen that returning to nature is also an important part of judging the elegance and vulgarity of artistic works.

Conclusion

From the above analysis, it can be seen that, on the one hand, "elegance" and "vulgarity" in art appreciation have gone through a long semantic evolution, respectively extending the meaning of "elegance" and "popularity". On the other hand, in art appreciation, we should treat the problem of "elegant" and "vulgar" dialectically. We should see that there is a certain relation between them, instead of separating them completely and opposing them.

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