

Group Compositions in Tang Dynasty Figure Painting and the Use of Color and Line

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ABSTRACT

Group portraits in Tang Dynasty figure painting employ the ingenious arrangement of multiple figures to construct complex social landscapes, with the use of color and line conveying the characteristics of the era and cultural connotations. This paper will conduct an in-depth analysis of the specific application of group composition, color, and line, as well as their expressive techniques, using representative works such as Portrait of Emperor Taizong Riding in a Palanquin and The Painting of Lady of Guoguo Spring Outing as examples. Analysis reveals that the density and dispersion of lines in group portraits are linked to power dynamics. At the same time, the intensity of colors such as cinnabar and azurite conveys a rigid hierarchical structure. This analysis will likely provide new perspectives and insights for the contemporary interpretation of traditional painting.

KEYWORDS

Tang Dynasty figure painting; group portrait composition; Color symbolism; Line application

1 Introduction

Under the influence of the Silk Road and cultural exchange during the Tang Dynasty, painters shifted from depicting individual portrait subjects to expressing social relationships and interpersonal social contexts through group portraits. Most Tang Dynasty paintings convey information about the Tang Dynasty's bureaucratic system, foreign relations policies, and the social status of women. The composition, posture, and clothing colors of the figures in the paintings reflect their social status and power. The proportions between masters and servants are used to compare the social status of the figures, and the gathering of people from different ethnic groups reflects the ethnic elements of the era's cultural integration. These are all pathways for interpreting the social structure of the Tang Dynasty through the paintings. Based on the above background, this paper takes Tang Dynasty group portrait art as its research object, analyzing the color and line techniques and the cultural connotations of Tang Dynasty figure paintings. A deeper analysis of group portraits, color, and line roles in Tang Dynasty painting creation can enhance our understanding of ancient paintings and provide references and insights for contemporary artistic creation.

2 The composition and expressive forms of group portraits in Tang Dynasty figure painting

2.1 The dynamics and interactions of group portraits

Tang Dynasty painters often used body movements and eye contact to depict the relationships between characters when painting multiple figures. Each character's posture, seating position, and gestures complement one another. For example, in scenes depicting the emperor and his ministers, the emperor is always portrayed sitting upright and steady, with subtle gestures such as raising his hand slightly or tilting his head to the side; the ministers, on the other hand, are shown bowing and bending their bodies to maintain a respectful posture; while the attendants' movements are more exaggerated, clearly indicating each person's status and rank ^[1]. Taking the "Portrait of Emperor Taizong Riding in a Palanquin" as an example, on the right side of the painting is Emperor Taizong seated in a palanquin, his body leaning slightly to the right, appearing both majestic and naturally facing the envoys. The palace maids carrying the palanquin have different postures: the two in front grip the palanquin poles tightly with both hands, their shoulders raised; the middle four are sideways, adjusting the direction; the rear three are on tiptoe, leaning backward to maintain balance, with all the palace maids' eyes fixed on the emperor. On the left side of the painting, the official in red robes leans forward, the envoy has his hands folded in front of his abdomen, and bows respectfully while moving forward; the interpreter in white stands half a step back, lowering his head to avoid direct eye contact with significant figures.

2.2 Spatial layout and rhythm in group portraits

The spatial treatment of Tang Dynasty group portraits demonstrates groundbreaking creativity. The pictorial space is first divided into two layers: physical and psychological. Physical space refers to the actual, visible environmental layout depicted in the painting, which establishes the specific setting where the narrative unfolds, allowing viewers to discern

the real-world environment in which the events occur immediately. This is typically achieved through the "main large, secondary small" principle, where central figures occupy the visual center of the composition and are depicted at an enlarged scale. In contrast, secondary figures are scaled down in proportion to their importance. The rhythmic sense of the composition is achieved through three primary methods: first, the arrangement of figures, such as the three horses at the forefront of "The Lady of Guo's Spring Outing" being spaced apart, the five horses in the middle being closely grouped, and the two horses at the rear being separated again. Second is directional guidance, where all characters' body orientation and clothing patterns point toward the most important figure. In "The Figure of the Lady Pounding Silk," the person pounding the cloth moves vertically up and down, the person sewing leans sideways, the person ironing the cloth extends horizontally, and the group of young women pulling the cloth lean backward, with all actions ultimately pointing toward the central position. Thirdly, there is the combination of movement and stillness. The painter depicts important figures in quiet poses, while surrounding them with figures engaged in more dynamic actions. For example, in the "Flower-Adorned Ladies," the noblewoman sits motionless. At the same time, a maid chasing butterflies runs with her sleeves fluttering, and a palace maid bends over to speak while fanning herself. The contrast between movement and stillness further emphasizes the dignity of the central figure ^[2].

Psychological space is created through the emotional atmosphere generated by the figures' postures, gazes, and actions, as well as the imaginative space left by the intentional "blankness" in the composition. Take Gu Hongzhong's "The Night Entertainments of Han Xizai" from the Five Dynasties period as an example, which depicts various scenes of listening to music, watching dances, and resting during a night banquet. Although the scene is divided by screens and beds, the composition is permeated with a suffocating yet chaotic atmosphere. Though Han Xizai is at the center of the banquet, he is often depicted in a pensive posture, contrasting with the reveling guests around him.

3 The use of color and expressive techniques in group portraits of tang dynasty figures

3.1 The symbolic and decorative nature of color

Tang Dynasty painters followed strict rules when using color. Yellow was reserved exclusively for the emperor. During the reign of Emperor Gaozu, it was decreed that "commoners were not permitted to wear red or yellow clothing." Emperor Gaozong later reiterated that "no one was allowed to wear yellow." Under such explicit regulations, the notion that bright yellow was a color reserved exclusively for the imperial family became deeply ingrained in people's minds. Red and purple were reserved for high-ranking officials, with those wearing such colors positioned in prominent locations within the composition; green and blue were assigned to mid-level officials, while ordinary soldiers and servants wore grayish-brown. While adhering to the rules, painters also paid attention to the aesthetic effect of colors ^[3]. They would paint golden patterns on dark-colored garments and add dark-colored borders to light-colored clothes, ensuring that even the same color did not appear monotonous. Analyzing the "Portrait of Emperor Taizong of Tang," Emperor Taizong is depicted wearing a bright yellow robe, while the palace maids around him wear shades of light green, light blue, and light pink. The three figures on the left include a guide official wearing a crimson robe, indicating his status as an essential ceremonial official; a Tibetan envoy wearing a striped robe in alternating deep green and earthy yellow, signifying his foreign origin; and an interpreter in grayish-white attire, serving as a contrasting backdrop. These color choices adhere to Tang Dynasty dress regulations while enriching the visual complexity of the entire painting. Looking at the cloth dyeing scene in "Court Ladies Preparing Newly Woven Silk," the cloth dyed is a vibrant vermilion red, the female workers are dressed in gray-blue garments, and the cloth drying racks retain their natural wood color. This depicts a realistic dyeing workshop scene and guides the viewer's gaze toward the central position of the red cloth to observe the dyeing process.

3.2 Contrast and harmony of colors

Tang Dynasty painters often combined contrasting colors to create a strong effect, but they adjusted the shades of the colors to avoid harshness. For example, in "The Painting of Lady of Guoguo Spring Outing," the artist used contrasting colors such as red and green, but paired the red clothing with deep green borders, creating a vivid yet harmonious effect. Large areas of dark colors are always paired with small patches of bright colors, such as a black hat with a gold hairpin. At the juncture of two different colors, the painter dips the brush in water and gently blends the colors to achieve a natural transition. When depicting scenes with multiple figures, the painter uses pure, vibrant colors for the main characters and mixed colors for secondary characters, highlighting the protagonists while maintaining overall harmony. In the painting, the lead black horse is paired with a gold saddle, the second white horse with a red tassel, and the third chestnut horse with a blue rein. Each horse has a different color yet maintains a connection. The willow trees in the background are first outlined in light green to establish the overall shape, then the leaves are dotted with dark green using small brushstrokes, and finally the branches are outlined in ink green. This allows for detailed observation up close while maintaining overall harmony from a distance ^[4].

3.3 The relationship between color and social status

During the Tang Dynasty, there were strict legal regulations regarding clothing colors. The emperor wore bright yellow in all settings, the crown prince wore light yellow, and princes were only permitted to wear earth yellow. Civil officials of the third rank and above wore purple, those of the fifth rank and above wore red, those of the seventh rank and above wore green, and those of the ninth rank wore blue. Generals' armor was coated with gold lacquer and edged with silver, while captains' armor was dyed copper red. Soldiers wore leather armor dyed dark brown, and commoners could only wear gray-white or the natural color of hemp cloth ("Officials of the third rank and above wore purple, those of the fourth and fifth ranks wore scarlet, those of the sixth and seventh ranks wore green, and those of the eighth and ninth ranks wore blue" (Tongdian)). Therefore, painters also used color and size to distinguish the status of characters in their works. In *Painting of Court Ladies Adorning Their Hair with Flowers*, the noblewoman at the center of the painting wears a crimson-red long skirt with an outer layer of gauze dyed in pale pinkish-purple, indicating her status as the highest-ranking noblewoman; the maid on the left wears a plain lake-blue skirt without patterns, while the maid on the right wears a bean-green blouse with a brown sash, both in simple colors. Looking at the colors of the army in the "Painting of Zhang Yichao Commanding His Troops in a March" painting: the commander-in-chief Zhang Yichao rides a white horse wearing golden armor, with a deep red banner held by the standard-bearer behind him; the front row of cavalry wears dark red battle robes, the middle row brown leather armor, and the rear row only exposes gray-black helmets. This color arrangement accurately reflects the military formation and creates a rhythmic variation of color blocks. Additionally, the painter pays attention to the use of new and old colors: the clothes of newly arrived palace maids are vibrant, while those of older palace maids are faded and white, directly conveying the texture of the fabric through this contrast.

4 The use and expression of line in Tang Dynasty group portraits of figures

4.1 The form and expressiveness of lines

Tang Dynasty painters were very particular about using lines in their figure paintings. Most Tang Dynasty painters used the ancient "floating thread" technique to draw the head, typically using a continuous, smooth curve starting from the forehead, then moving to the temples and chin to outline the entire face. The lines depicting the shoulders were straight, conveying a sense of stability. When drawing the arms, the lines gradually tapered from the shoulders toward the wrists, creating a natural variation in thickness. In depicting the hands, artists used several short, slightly curved lines to represent the fingers, with turns at the knuckles to capture their form^[5]. When depicting the clothing of group portraits, if the figures are wearing heavy robes, thick, straight lines are used, with the lines at the elbows, knees, and other bent areas forming distinct angles, giving the clothing a crisp, structured appearance. The thin inner garments' lines are fine and naturally form soft, wavy contours as they follow the body's curves. The silk sash at the waist is often drawn in one continuous, flowing line. The artist uses intermittent, faint, short lines to depict its lightness and movement. In depicting the posture of the figure, the central line from the top of the head to the feet is straight and vertical for a standing person; for a walking person, the central line tilts slightly forward; for a seated person, the central line forms a right-angle bend at the waist. When the wrists are lowered, the folds of the sleeves naturally relax downward, with evenly spaced crease lines; when the hands are raised, the spacing between the folds at the elbows increases. In the treatment of the skirt hem, when the figure is stationary, the lines of the skirt hem follow a natural vertical downward flow with even intervals; when the figure is moving, the skirt hem flows, with the lines forming wave-like undulations. The lines of the skirt hem swing forward are slightly shorter, while those that flow backward are elongated.

4.2 The integration of lines with facial expressions and emotions

The mastery of Tang Dynasty figure painting lies in its ability to convey the spirit and inner feelings of the subject, inheriting the essence of Gu Kaizhi's "On Capturing the Spirit." It seeks to depict the spirit through form, with facial expressions conveyed through subtle changes in key lines on the face. When the subject is calm, the eyebrows are two straight lines parallel to the corners of the eyes; when angry, the eyebrow lines rise upward, and short vertical lines are added at the brow ridge. Those with a strong and resolute personality have angular, forceful facial contours, especially at the jawline; those with a gentle and kind-hearted nature have rounded, curved facial lines. When painting the lips of noblewomen, artists often first outline them with vermilion red, then use a brighter rouge color to delicately shade the inner and outer edges, creating a refined and elegant appearance. Additionally, the lines of the hands are crucial for expressing emotions: when a character clenches their fists, the lines at the knuckles are drawn prominently with distinct angles; when the hands are relaxed, the lines of the fingers are drawn in a natural, relaxed manner, and the gaps between the fingers are drawn evenly. Furthermore, the relationships between characters can also be seen through the interplay of lines^[6]. These clever uses of lines can be seen in specific examples from famous paintings, such as "The Lady of Guo

Visiting in Spring": The expressions of the guards in the front row are solemn, with their eyebrows drawn using two short, upward-sloping lines, and their lips tightly closed into a firm horizontal line; the Lady of Guo in the center of the painting has her eyebrows drawn as elegant long arcs, with the corners of her eyes depicted using thin, upward-sloping lines, giving her an air of grace and elegance. The lines on the faces of the attendants beside her are softer, with more curved eyebrows and rounder eyes, giving them a gentle appearance. Tang Dynasty painters used these combinations of lines to vividly capture the forms, expressions, emotions, and relationships between characters on silk scrolls.

5 Conclusion

In summary, in the composition of group portraits in Tang Dynasty figure painting, artists used differences in positioning and proximity to establish social hierarchy and interpersonal relationships. In terms of color application, they employed contrasts between light and dark tones to emphasize spatial depth and used gradations in saturation to convey character traits. Lines were used to depict figure forms and expressions, conveying emotions. Together, these three elements form a complete visual narrative system. Future research could compare tomb murals and silk scroll paintings as a starting point to analyze the differences in the actual application of color symbolism. Such explorations will deepen our understanding of Tang Dynasty art and provide new pathways for the contemporary transformation of traditional painting language.

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