Image Analysis of the Book of Landscape Volume by Dai Benxiao (II)

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Abstract

The book of Landscape Volume is a late paper-based ink work by Dai Benxiao, a painter of adherents in the Ming and Qing Dynasties. This album has a total of 12 paintings, depicting all natural landscapes. This study focuses on the analysis of "Landscape Volume" (II) (Figure 1) selected from among Dai Benxiao's twelve works. In this picture, Dai Benxiao not only simply depicts natural landscapes, but also aims to create a picture of the Peach Garden through the depiction of natural landscapes. Therefore, this image has certain research value. In this study, the author will conduct an image analysis of Dai Benxiao's painting "The Book of Landscape Volume" (II) from several theoretical levels of image analysis, including pre-iconographic, iconography, iconology, and formal analysis. This paper will analyze the deep connotation behind the images of "The Book of Mountains and Rivers" (II), and explain the multi-level significance contained in its images.

Keywords

Dai Benxiao, Landscape Volume, Image analysis

1. Life of a painter

Dai Benxiao (1621-1693) was a famous adherent painter and a representative of Xin'an School and Huangshan School. Dai Benxiao liked to travel and make friends. Throughout Dai Benxiao's life, he visited Taihua three times, Huangshan twice, Qilu Yanzhao in the north, Zhouqin Ancient Road in the west, climbed to Mount Taishan, found Mount Lu, and arrived at Tongguan County... He went through twists and turns, encountered dangerous situations many times, and collected beautiful scenery every time, which can be called "going to the Five Mountains alone after a lifetime of death." Where he went, he met people of learning and virtue. Friendly with painters and poets such as Jian Jiang, Gong Xian, Fu Shan, Fu Mei, Shi Tao, Mei Qing, Kong Shangren, Yan Ermei and Wang Hongzhuan.

Dai Benxiao is good at painting landscapes, and advocates learning from the ancients instead of sticking to the ancient method, emphasizing "taking nature as the true source" and "I use my method". Most of his paintings are small scenes in volumes. He learned the styles of Ni Zan, Wang Meng, and Huang Gongwang in the Yuan Dynasty and was able to develop new content in terms of style. Most of his paintings use dry brush and light ink and show the quiet landscape. Some of his painting subjects are the portrayal of real mountains and rivers, and some are superpositions of images. Most of his works are the expression of subjective emotions. In his later years, he formed a faint and simple painting style with extremely light pen and ink and overlapping methods, which dates back to the ancients and has its own style, revealing an emotion beyond the ordinary. Based on his own poems, we can conclude that this style of pen and ink is "sweeping away the clouds and wanting nothing" and "The most separated place is the most blurred".
2. Pre-iconographic

Pre-iconographic description is the first stage of iconology research. It is a preliminary and intuitive description of the visual image of a painting, which does not involve the analysis of the content of the work, that is, "what you see is what you get".

This Landscape Book is the work of Dai Benxiao, a painter of the Ming and Qing Dynasties. There are twelve paintings, 34.2 cm in length and 23 cm in width, which are now in Shenyang Palace Museum. In the picture of the book of Landscape Volume (II), there are mountains standing near and far, and trees standing at the top of the mountains, with the mountains rising and falling at the right of the center of the picture in the distance. The middle view is located on the left side of the picture. There is a waterfall flowing down from the mountain among the trees in the middle of the mountain, and the water hits the reef at the bottom of the valley so that the fog is not visible, which shows the depth of the valley (Xu Hongquan. 2021). In the center of the picture, there is a cave in the mountain, in which stalactites hang upside down. If there is a person wearing a plain robe sitting in the cave, his facial expression is blurred, accompanied by a guqin in front of him. In the close shot, it seems that there is a path extending from left to right, accompanied by peach blossoms. On the other side of the road, there are mountains and stones blocking the front road, which makes people wonder where this road leads. At the top right of the picture, there is a poetic inscription: "How can one escape from the mundane and achieve this state? The peach blossoms used to earn the flowing water, and the immortals in the painting are passed on for it."

Figure 1. Landscape Book (II) 1693 34.2cm×23cm Shenyang Palace Museum.

Figure 2. Dai Benxiao, Fu Shan Collection of Calligraphy and Painting (I) 20×23.3cm Shanghai Museum.
3. Iconography

Iconography is the second stage of iconographic research. According to Panofsky, this stage is no longer a "what you see is what you get" kind of expression. Works of art do not appear out of thin air but are created by artists based on a certain cultural context. The analysis at this stage is based on the interpretation and analysis of the images based on the documentation (Xu Hongquan, 2021; Owen Panofsky, 2011).

Throughout Dai Benxiao's book of Landscape Volume (Ⅱ), I found that Dai Benxiao intends to focus on depicting the image of the cave and the people in the cave throughout the picture. The inscription in the picture reads "The peach blossoms used to earn the flowing water, and the immortal in the painting is passed on. Together with the performance of the image, we know that the cave is where the immortal is sitting and practicing. At the entrance of the cave, Dai Benxiao also draws upside-down stalactite statues, which give a sense of shading at the entrance of the cave. In front of the immortal in the cave, a Guqin is placed, because Dai Benxiao is a painter of the remnant, the "Guqin" he painted has a unique directivity. In the special context of the early Qing Dynasty, "Guqin" has the homophonic sound of "Qing", and the meaning of "avoiding the Qing Dynasty". The silence of the cave and the people in the cave, coupled with the waterfall cascading down to the bottom, adds a sense of desolation to the already lonely atmosphere, further deepening the misery of the people in the cave.

4. Iconology

Iconology is the third stage of iconographic research, at which point it reaches the most advanced stage of iconography, to which stage more attention is paid to deciphering what is obscured by the works and analyzing the historical and cultural contents behind the images. We can analyze in depth the economic, political, and cultural aspects of the time in which the painter lived.

The late Ming and early Qing dynasties were an era of storms and struggles for power and profit. Together with local droughts, peasant uprisings, and wars, the people were in a miserable situation for a long time. Class contradictions were very serious, the political situation was even more turbulent, factional struggles became increasingly fierce, the literati competed with each other, and the masters rose, internal and external problems became the primary problem of the Ming government. Against this background, many Ming survivors were unwilling to compromise with the Qing dynasty, so they chose to put their hearts and souls into painting and calligraphy, aspiring to live outside of the world, to travel in nature, and to express their anger. In this era's background, the peach blossom beside the path in the close view of the picture does not exactly imply that this road leads to the Peach Garden that Dai Benxiao yearns for in his heart.

Dai Benxiao's ancestral tomb is near Jilong Mountain, which is the forty-third blessed place of Taoism, and Dai Benxiao's "Song of Baishi Cave" in the "Yu Sheng Poetry Manuscript" to memorialize the ancient Taoist gods and goddesses, and Baishi Cave is also Dai Benxiao's number "Changzhen Jingshou Cave Woodcutter", and Baishi Cave is the twenty-first small cave. From this, we can see that Dai Benxiao has been surrounded by the idea of a "cave and blessed land" since he was a child, let's look at the book of Landscape Volume, which focuses on the "cave" and "people in the cave" in its second picture. The "cave" and the "people in the cave" constitute the vocabulary of "cave
heaven” in Dai Benxiao's mind, the Dongtian he described is not a simple Taoist "Dongtian" or a Buddhist "Dongtian", but a unique "Dongtian" that combines the two and infuses the thoughts of the adherents. This not only reflects the aspirations of the Ming and Qing relics for anti-Qing restoration and a better life but also the helplessness of seclusion in the mountains, as well as the heartfelt voices of many relic painters.

Figure 4. Dai Benxiao, Fu Shan Calligraphy, and Painting Collection (Part VI) 20×23.3cm Shanghai Museum.

5. Formal Analysis

The formal analysis method was proposed by the famous Swiss artist Wolflin. Its essence is language (semantic structure), not involving image and scene. It mainly analyzes the semantic elements, brush strokes, color, color block, structure, etc., so as to highlight the uniqueness of the language.

First of all, from the composition of the picture, in this picture, Dai Benxiao concentrates on the main scenery in the lower left center, while the right side is painted with very little scenery, leaving a large area of white space on the picture to make people feel cold and lonely. In order to break this unbalanced relationship, Dai Benxiao inscribed a poem in five lines at the top right and added a seal to achieve a balanced picture. Secondly, from the viewpoint of ink color and line: Dai Benxiao is good at making landscapes with dry brush, and in this picture, he uses seal script to outline the outline of mountains and trees and uses extremely light ink color to slightly chap and dye, which has the rhythm of people in Yuan dynasty. This painting is actually a change of Dai Benxiao's brushwork from Huang Gongwang's and Wang Meng's brushwork of the Yuan Dynasty, with real mountains and real water, presenting the image of ink pale and withered. The dry brush can reflect the reality and movement of the picture, making it look hazy, and giving people a feeling of uncertainty and elusiveness.

Figure 5. Dai Benxiao Mount Huangshan Illustrated Album - Wenshu Academy 21.5×17cm Guangdong Provincial Museum.
6. Conclusion

In this essay, we analyze the book of Landscape Volume by Dai Benxiao (II) on four levels: pre-iconographic, iconography, iconology, and style analysis, which helps us explore the deeper connotation of this work. From the surface of the picture, Dai Benxiao only depicts people in the cave cultivating in the mountains, but through analysis of the picture, we can conclude that the deeper meaning of this picture is Dai Benxiao's metaphor for the unique "Dongtian" and what is the Peach Garden? The Peach Garden is not only the yearning of Ming and Qing dynasty painters for anti-Qing and restoration of the Ming Dynasty but also the yearning for a better life. It also expresses the painter's helplessness in hiding in the mountains.

References