

“Moving Thoughts” and “Wonderful”: A Textual Research on the Blending Mechanism of Subject and Object in Gu Kaizhi’s Artistic Thinking

Yujie Zhu

Hanjiang Normal University, Shiyan 442000, Hubei, China

Copyright: © 2025 Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC BY 4.0), permitting distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is cited

Abstract: Gu Kaizhi plays an important role in the history of Chinese painting, and is praised as “Three Wonders” by contemporary people. Among them, figure painting is the most outstanding. Gu Kaizhi has profound and comprehensive cultural and artistic attainments, and has made remarkable achievements in aesthetic theory. “Fantasy” has become the core proposition of his painting theory and artistic creation idea, which not only makes a classic judgment for the development of China’s painting aesthetics, but also reveals the whole process of artistic creation. How does the creator interact and link with the real world, through the blending and meeting between the subject and the object, so as to show the emotions and thoughts contained in it incisively and vividly, and show the author’s subjective image by depicting the characters.

Keywords: Gu Kaizhi’s works; Artistic thinking; Blending mechanism of subject and object; On the wonderful idea of migration

Online publication: September 26, 2025

1. Introduction

Gu Kaizhi was an outstanding painter and theorist in the Eastern Jin Dynasty. He took painting as his lifelong career, and his subjects and types were numerous, among which figure painting was the most prominent. His theory of “Moving Thoughts and Wonderful Perception” was put forward, along with the whole period of the transformation of Chinese classical painting theory. In the early stage, it focused on technique training, and achieved the formal purpose. In the later stage, it paid more attention to conveying verve and focusing on the description and display of the subject spirit. And “fantastic imagination” can put the creator’s own subject spiritual realm and activities at the core of the creative process, beyond the traditional theoretical summary, and raise the focus to the in-depth discussion of artistic essence and thinking.

2. The source of thought: The reasons for “moving the mind is wonderful”

2.1. The background of the times: Wei and Jin demeanor and people’s consciousness

Wei and Jin Dynasties experienced hundreds of years of social turmoil, and the original unified political ideal and social order were disintegrated. Yet, it was also an era marked by the prevailing practice of Qingtan, or “pure conversation”,

which was mainly manifested in the great change in the spiritual pursuit of the literati class. In the past, they mainly attached their own values to their home country and the world, pursuing fame and social status. With the earth-shaking changes in society, scholars paid more attention to internal exploration, focusing on excavating their own life values, emotional expression, and talent interpretation. During this period, the characters depicted by Gu Kaizhi in surviving copies of works such as *Admonitions of the Instructress to the Court Ladies*, *Nymph of the Luo River*, and *Wise and Benevolent Women* moved beyond mere physical resemblance to focus more vividly on expressing their inner talents, temperament, and spiritual demeanor. This artistic pursuit corresponded to the awakening of the subjective spirit among intellectuals during the Wei and Jin periods, who turned their attention inward, exploring their own life values, emotional expression, and interpretation of talent. The awakening of the subject spirit of these intellectuals provided a prerequisite for the behavioral logic of thinking. It means that artists should first explore and identify a subject spirit worthy of extension and output, and on this basis, explore the self-awareness and rich spiritual world possessed by the individuals, so that this active spiritual activity can be described and displayed in the form of painting. Therefore, Gu Kaizhi first used the proposition of writing God in form to give full play to the subject spirit in the process of painting creation.

2.2. Philosophical foundation: The influence of metaphysics “the debate between words and meaning” and “the debate between form and spirit”

The long-term turbulent social pattern not only overthrew the original stable social order, but also promoted the unprecedented prosperous development of ideology and culture. The spiritual pursuit of the intellectuals experienced a great turn. Artistic creators, represented by Gu Kaizhi, attached great importance to the inward exploration and admiration of the subjective spirit, which led more and more artistic creators to actively project their inner feelings, ideas and thoughts into the real scene in the form of painting, and show their individual feelings and cognition of life through in-depth dialogue and communication. During this period, metaphysics provided a direct theoretical basis for the formation of Gu Kaizhi's theory of “thinking wonderfully”, among which with Wang Bi's doctrine of “attaining meaning and forgetting words” serving as a representative example. He once said, “The reason why the speaker is clear about images is that he forgets words with images; The reason why the elephant is interested is that he is proud and forgets the elephant. “The ultimate goal is to use language and symbols as creative tools and means, and to emphasize the ponder, experience, excavation and display of meaning, which also affirms the value of exploring the inner essence, provides a method and framework for the theory of “thinking wonderfully”, and requires artistic creators to feel and experience with their own hearts, and boldly create and extend the inner charm and thoughts of the object with the help of the media and activity form of artistic creation.

2.3. Artistic consciousness: The improvement of painting from technology to spirit

In the process of painting, Gu Kaizhi not only pays attention to showing the characters' personality and emotional characteristics by depicting the details of scenery and costumes, but also grasps the characters' personality, temperament, elegance and inner feelings in advance and understands them as a whole in order to achieve the effect of vivid portrayal. This can be analyzed in the historical scene of art development in Wei and Jin Dynasties. In the past, painting, as an art form, was more used in political education and propaganda ideas, with certain social utility characteristics. However, with the change of scholars' pursuit of spirit, painting has become a tool for deep dialogue and communication between creators and painted objects, focusing on excavating and expressing inner feelings and thoughts, and transferring these feelings and thoughts into works in the form of painting. Therefore, creators are required to be deeply involved in the main spirit. In this process, the traditional painting skills gradually improved from technology to spirit. As an artistic creator, he should not only have rich knowledge and life experience, but also have keen observation and identification, and he can have in-depth dialogue and exchange with the spiritual subject he depicts, so that this complex psychological activity can be displayed and spread through vivid description of painting skills. From the change of Gu Kaizhi's theme, we can further understand this artistic consciousness. In the past, Gu Kaizhi painted landscapes and wanted to show the scenery and spirit

of this natural scenery more. Nonetheless, it was precisely through his practice in figure painting, a representational art, that Gu Kaizhi was driven to profoundly grasp the inner spirit and personal temperament of his subjects. This depth of understanding played a role in advancing his theory of “wonderful conception”^[2].

3. The concept analysis: The connotation of “thinking” and “wonderful”

3.1. “Thinking”: The subject’s dynamic spiritual projection

Gu Kaizhi once put forward the aesthetic proposition of painting that “the imagination is wonderful” for the first time in Wei Jin’s praise of flowing paintings. He once stated that “every painting is the most difficult for people, the second landscape is the second dog and horse; The terrace is sure to be an ear, and it is easy to be good, and it is wonderful to move. In this aesthetic theory, he put forward the importance of imagination to the artistic creation of painting. It is usually easier to describe objects than characters, because describing objects only needs to refer to the real objects in real life, make meticulous observations and reproduce the details. However, in the process of portraying characters, we should not only grasp the appearance characteristics, create a unique character image, but also fully show the spiritual outlook of the characters on the basis of their original images. In this link, we should rely on the artistic imagination and creativity of the creators themselves to transform the real-life prototype into an image with artistic aesthetic characteristics. Therefore, the realization of “moving the imagination” often needs the initiative and imagination of the creator himself, and it needs to deeply dissect and analyze the observed individual characters, as if the painter had a deep communication and dialogue with the depicted object, and it usually takes a long time to observe and ponder, and the artistic characteristics and emotional attitudes of the painted object are combined with their own aesthetic ideals to move, so artistic creation is often a dynamic spiritual projection of the subject. It breaks the barrier of the split between subject and object in the past, but establishes the connection between the painter and the painted object from the spiritual level, and transforms this objective object into a subject who can talk and communicate with it.

3.2. “Wonderful”: The transcendental understanding after blending

“Wonderful” is more reflected in the transcendental understanding generated by the artistic creators themselves after the blending of subject and object. It is not a simple presentation of the observed surface phenomena and style features, but a presentation of its unspeakable spiritual characteristics through in-depth excavation, pondering and experience, which can show the painter’s own grasp of macro, overall and overall characteristics. This requires the artist to fully think in the early stage, and in the process of creation, put his own cognition, emotion and attitude into the object ontology, and in this process, he should also use and exert his own imagination to extend this idea, instead of just pursuing the shape, but based on a higher level and a higher level to convey the spiritual characteristics. Emphasizing that the subject often needs to go through the early stage of thinking, it can produce a sense of epiphany, clearly understand and grasp the charm that the depicted object wants to convey, so that this artistic image appears as if it were coming to the fore, which is not only the result of deep blending between the subject and the object, but also a new image produced after spiritual communication. This final achievement reflects the artist’s inner pursuit of beauty and the artist’s own unique aesthetic image, which goes beyond the traditional logical analysis and feature extraction, but is a direct display of philosophical pursuit in the artistic field, resulting in an artistic concept of the integration of subject and object.

3.3. “Writing spirit through form”: The goal achieved through “wonderful conception”

“The Records of Famous Paintings of Past Dynasties” said: “Like the beauty of human beings, we can get their flesh, their bones and their gods”. From this perspective, Gu Kaizhi attaches great importance to the refinement and expression of the relationship between form and spirit in the process of painting creation. He shows the charm contained in the objective object by depicting its shape and appearance characteristics, and integrates the spiritual temperament, ideological activities and inner world of the depicted object into his imagination and cognition, so as to show it at a higher level. In this process,

it is not necessary to overemphasize the importance of “God” or the characteristics that shape is lighter than God, but to place it in an equally important position. The characteristics of the depicted object, which are difficult to capture, express and describe in words, are vividly reflected through figure painting. In this process, “wonderful conception” provides both the practical pathway and the creative means to achieve the ultimate artistic goal: “writing spirit through form”. in which depicting the figure’s shape is the starting point, and it is also the ultimate carrier to convey the charm, which depends on the meticulous observation and accurate insight of the artist himself, and incorporates creative skills to present the internal image in a way that contains the charm. Picturing God can not only present the wonderful internal mechanism and process in an external form. It also makes the mysterious artistic thinking have a foothold in reality, showing the artist’s profound insights and thoughts on painting, as if writing God in form is a bridge between internal spiritual characteristics and external characteristics, which will eventually point to the purpose of vivid painting.

4. Mechanism research: The dynamic process of “subject and object blending”

4.1. The first stage: The initial contact between subject and object

In the dynamic process of the blending of subject and object, the first stage is the process of the artist collecting, observing and sorting out materials, which puts higher demands on the artistic quality, observation ability and refining ability of the artistic creators themselves. They need to maintain a certain degree of patience and acumen, be able to call the senses, and observe the appearance characteristics, body structure, clothing characteristics, gestures and so on of the depicted objects in detail, so as to initially establish a three-dimensional perception impression. In this process, Gu Kaizhi is often able to quickly capture the most unique and eye-catching external features of the depicted object, and use them as a breakthrough for subsequent vivid expression. He emphasized the appearance and image of the characters, and once there is a small mistake, it will affect the expression and presentation effect of the overall charm. From this perspective, Gu Kaizhi attaches great importance to any details and external features in the process of accurately refining the morphological characteristics of the depicted objects. Moreover, in the process of commenting on predecessors’ works, he not only stressed the need to refine and summarize its external form accurately, but also to understand the historical background, natural space and environment in which the depicted object is located. He can combine the existing painting skills and creative experience to raise this observation and experience to a higher level, and on the basis of preliminary understanding, he can perceive the complexity and three-dimensional nature of the characters, so as to achieve a nuanced insight into the character structure. On this basis, Gu Kaizhi also emphasized that after the initial contact, it is necessary to observe the detailed features of different parts, so as to present them artistically ^[3]. For example, we can analyze the internal relationship between the observed facial features of the characters and their spirits, so as to show the particularity of the inner life of the characters with the help of the most attractive appearance features of the characters.

4.2. The second stage: The deep mutual infiltration of subject and object

The second stage of the integration of subject and object broke through the initial sensory contact in the first stage, but integrated rational cognition and thinking, which officially opened the migration behavior. Specifically, the spirit of the subject penetrates and blends deeply into the interior of the object, and the original boundary between the subject and the object is more blurred. Through deep dialogue and communication, the emotional and spiritual levels penetrate each other deeply. Specifically, we can extract the characteristics of this stage from Gu Kaizhi’s paintings. For example, Xie Kun, the governor of Yuzhang and uncle of the Eastern Jin minister Xie An, was known for his open-minded and generous nature. He once compared himself to the high-ranking official Yu Liang, saying, “In governing court affairs and setting an example for all officials, I am not as capable as Liang. Yet when it comes to embracing the simplicity of hills and valleys, I believe I surpass him”. Accordingly, when Gu Kaizhi painted Xie Kun’s portrait, he placed him among rocks, a vivid representation that captured his spirit. According to historical records, in the process of painting characters, Gu Kaizhi not only made meticulous observation, but also built a long-term and continuous imagination. This way made up for the limitations of

artistic creators in their senses. Instead, through rich imagination, he was able to transcend the level of real things, as if he were in the inner part of the object, and realized the influence of the historical background on the characters' images and characteristics, which was described by the shape of the object, causing deeper associations, thus reaching "Wonderful".

4.3. The third stage: The peak of blending

The third stage is not only the peak of the blending of subject and object, but also an important moment full of mystery and drama. In this stage, the subject and object have entered a state of forgetting both things and me, and the self-consciousness of the artistic creator gradually fades away, not because of the obvious distinction between the observed objects. Specifically, in the process of painting, Gu Kaizhi gradually achieved complete fairness with the spiritual pursuit of the depicted object, so he can reveal and express it vividly, as if he were in a pure stream of consciousness without utility. There is no difference between the subject and the object. The subject does not just observe the object through the senses, but shares the fate with the object, and experiences the changes of the times and mountains and rivers. In this process, it seems to echo Zhuangzi's thoughts, and so does Gu Kaizhi. The wonder of "wonderful" is also realized at this stage, which is not only the migration of the early object thought and appearance characteristics, but also makes the art painter clearly see his inner subjective spirit. The vivid portrayal pursued by Gu Kaizhi not only emphasizes the expression of verve, but also breeds unique artistic life and value at this stage, which enables the subject and object to achieve a short-term unity in the spiritual level, thus leaving a brilliant and mysterious artistic image, and itself has entered an obsessive state, no longer being disturbed and influenced by the external physical environment, but being able to exert extraordinary painting skills with an extremely focused attitude and mental state ^[4].

4.4. The fourth stage: The birth of new images.

The fourth stage refers to the wonderful completion stage, just like Gu Kaizhi's finishing touch, which is not a definite pen that he imagined at will, but a precise portrayal of the spiritual characteristics of the characters through the eyes, so as to better serve the purpose of vivid expression. The finishing touch is often the most critical appearance in figure painting, and Gu Kaizhi's handling of details in this respect, with meticulous and ingenious depiction, can achieve the finishing touch, and also marks the end point of transforming his theory into practice. From the previous observation of characters, we can extract the features full of verve, and build a harmonious artistic order through the establishment and organization of primary and secondary, dense and other procedures on the screen. In this process, Gu Kaizhi created an idealized form of expression, which originated from the meticulous observation of the depicted object, but at the same time conveyed the characteristics of form and spirit higher than the object itself. In order to achieve this goal, Gu Kaizhi gave full play to the initiative and creativity of his own subject, and constructed a new artistic world. His "Gao Gu You Simiao" not only depicts the figure's appearance, but also better conveys the character's style and spiritual characteristics through the elastic, smooth and natural line texture, thereby elevating the painting's visual language to a more refined and captivating level. Through the figure painting images left by Gu Kaizhi, these works reflect the blending relationship between the subject and the object. The artistic images depicted not only come from the real figure images, but also transcend the natural objects, but also integrate Gu Kaizhi's emotions, thoughts and attitudes, which is not only a vivid portrayal of the observed object, but also a new image of Gu Kaizhi in the process of artistic creation. He verified that the theory of "thinking wonderfully" is not empty talk, but can be verified and practiced in the real artistic creation ^[5].

5. Concluding remarks

To sum up, in the context of Gu Kaizhi's painting art, we should not only deeply analyze its artistic characteristics, but also focus on analyzing the inner charm of these works with the help of his theory of "thinking wonderfully", so as to quickly refine its aesthetic ideals and thoughts, and analyze Gu Kaizhi's artistic creation thinking and ideas with the help of the proposition of describing God in form. By understanding the operational logic of the blending between subject and object,

the principle and core idea of how to “paint the spirit” in artistic creation are further revealed. Through the deep blending of life and spirit, the creation is more vital in the artist’s personal life experience and emotional input.

Funding

Teaching Reform Research Project of Hanjiang Normal University: Exploration of Innovative Teaching Paths for Chinese Painting Courses in the Digital Age (Project No.: 2024B08).

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

- [1] Leng H, 2024, Analysis of the Artistic Characteristics of Gu Kaizhi’s Painting Aesthetics. In: Beijing Friendship Heritage Culture Foundation, Proceedings of the 2024 “Heritage Forum” Seminar. Zhenjiang Art Museum (Zhenjiang Painting and Calligraphy Institute), 27–31.
- [2] Liu N, 2023, Re-examination of the Ideological Origins of Gu Kaizhi’s “Fantastic Thoughts” and “Vivid Portrayal”. Journal of Tianjin Academy of Fine Arts, 2023(02): 40–42.
- [3] Liu J, 2023, Body Subject and Thinking in Images: An Analysis of Gu Kaizhi’s Body Aesthetic Thought of “Thinking Wonderfully”. Art Education Research, 2023(06): 39–41.
- [4] Li M, 2022, Analysis of Gu Kaizhi’s Theory of Form and Spirit. Beauty and Times (Middle), 2022(01): 14–16.
- [5] Diaoweng, 2022, Thinking Is as Wonderful as Gossamer. Children’s Chinese Studies, 2022(01): 26–27.

Publisher’s note

Whioce Publishing remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.