

A Brief Discussion on Historical Truth and Artistic Truth in the Creation of History Paintings

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ABSTRACT

Historical painting creation stands as a significant intersection of art and history, valuing the reproduction of historical truth and the conveyance of historical spirit through artistic means. This paper delves into the historical and artistic truth in historical painting creation, arguing that historical truth forms the cornerstone while artistic truth embodies the personalized expression of artists. Moreover, both historical and artistic truth coexist in opposition and unity in historical painting creation, and their balance is crucial for producing exceptional works. By analyzing specific historical paintings, this paper proposes principles and practical methods for balancing historical and artistic truth, offering theoretical guidance and practical reference for historical painting creation.

KEYWORDS

Historical Painting Creation; Historical Truth; Artistic Truth; Conflict; Unity.

1. INTRODUCTION

When discussing the authenticity in painting, the definition of "truth" varies across different historical periods. From the "imitation theory" in ancient Greece, which defined an "ideal truth," to the combination of science, art, emotion, and rationality during the Renaissance, and to the abstract and planar truth in contemporary material painting, the connotation of "truth" continues to evolve. As major historical painting projects receive increasing attention from the state, the "authenticity" of historical paintings has become a goal pursued by creators. According to Hegel's philosophy, "everything that exists has authenticity only when it exists as an idea." The truth in painting is based on the art form itself and represents a judgment on artistic language. Historical paintings, which depict past events, must respect historical facts. Therefore, both "historical truth" and "artistic truth" need to be considered in the creation of historical paintings [1,2].

This study contributes to the ongoing discourse on authenticity in painting by tracing the evolving concept of "truth" across different historical periods and applying this understanding to the creation of historical paintings. It highlights how the notion of authenticity in art is not fixed but shaped by cultural, philosophical, and aesthetic paradigms of each era. From the imitation theory of ancient Greece, which emphasized representing idealized reality, to the Renaissance fusion of science, human emotion, and rational order, and eventually to the abstract and material explorations of modern art, each phase redefines what is perceived as "true" in painting [2]. This dynamic understanding of truth provides an important foundation for evaluating the authenticity of historical paintings today.

One of the key findings of this research is the dual requirement of "historical truth" and "artistic truth" in the context of historical painting. While historical truth demands factual accuracy and respect for

real events, artistic truth pertains to how well the artwork conveys deeper meaning, emotion, and aesthetic coherence through its visual language. These two dimensions do not always align, creating a complex challenge for artists who aim to represent history faithfully while also achieving artistic excellence [2].

Furthermore, drawing on Hegel's view that authenticity arises when something exists as an idea, this study underscores that the authenticity of historical paintings depends not only on their alignment with historical facts but also on their conceptual and philosophical grounding. As state-led historical art projects gain prominence, especially in national or ideological contexts, the pressure to balance documentary accuracy with artistic expression grows stronger. This research therefore sheds light on the importance of a theoretically informed approach to historical painting—one that does not merely replicate facts but interprets and transforms them into meaningful artistic narratives. By bridging philosophical theory with artistic practice, the study offers valuable insights for contemporary artists and art historians alike [3].

2. THE CONNOTATIONS OF HISTORICAL TRUTH AND ARTISTIC TRUTH

History painting, as a unique form of artistic expression, typically revolves around major historical events, figures, or periods. Through artistic techniques, it distills profound themes embedded in history. The concept of history painting was proposed during the Renaissance by narrative painters such as Leonardo da Vinci, who believed it could fulfill ethical education or ideological discipline. Leonardo's *The Last Supper*, which depicts Jesus and the twelve apostles sharing their final meal, uses compositional structure and character expressions to convey inner tensions of conflict, betrayal, and redemption in the religious narrative. It invites the viewer to reflect on the cultural and historical meanings behind the story from an artistic perspective. History painting is not merely a straightforward depiction of historical events; rather, it deeply explores the relationship between historical truth and artistic truth.

Historical truth, as the name suggests, refers to the authenticity of historical events, figures, and cultural backgrounds. In the creation of history paintings, historical truth is the foundation—an essential principle that artists must respect and follow. When Jacques-Louis David created *The Death of Marat*, he relied on his close relationship with Marat. After Marat was assassinated, David visited the scene and requested that the body remain unmoved at the moment it fell. Since it was summer and the body quickly began to decompose, David covered it with cloth, exposing only the hand. This approach allowed him to observe the corpse closely and create a painting that was both realistic and moving. The value of historical truth lies in providing a solid foundation for artistic creation, enabling the work to withstand the scrutiny of time and its audience [3,4,5].

Artistic truth, in this context, refers to the truth within the realm of art. It is an idealized truth—one that embodies the artist's thoughts, beliefs, emotions, and creativity, reflecting their unique personal expression. When Chinese painter Xu Beihong created *Refugees*, he made artistic alterations to the figures, elongating their bodies and limbs to vividly convey the emaciation and suffering of laborers under oppression. This expression embodied the desperate yearning for salvation among the people following the "September 18 Incident." While artistic truth does not equate to literal truth, it can generate a distinctive aesthetic experience, reveal underlying conflicts, and excavate the essential nature of life, thereby resonating deeply with viewers [4,5].

In the creation of history painting, historical truth and artistic truth are always complementary. Artists must consider how to enhance the plausibility and credibility of historical truth through artistic treatment, and how to use history to comment on contemporary realities. As noted in *Painting and Reality*, artistic activity is essentially a reconstruction of the real world—a novel interpretation of historical facts. Thus, artists face the challenge of skillfully balancing historical truth and creative

expression, striving to produce works that not only faithfully reflect historical reality but also possess high artistic value.

3. THE EMBODIMENT OF HISTORICAL TRUTH IN THE CREATION OF HISTORY PAINTINGS

For a history painting to evoke a genuine sense of history, it must immerse the viewer in a specific historical context-otherwise, it loses its essential meaning. Historical truth refers to the actual occurrences of historical events, without exaggeration, diminishment, or distortion. For instance, the commonly acknowledged “Victory in the War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression” represents a historical truth, marking the great triumph of the Chinese people in resisting foreign invaders [5,6].

In the creative process, artists must delve deeply into historical research, clarifying the primary and secondary threads of events. They must sift through available historical sources to distinguish fact from fiction, study stories, characters, settings, and the clothing and objects specific to the historical period. Through preliminary sketches from multiple perspectives, they optimize and reorganize elements to ultimately arrive at the ideal composition that best captures the decisive historical moment.

Historical truth provides artists with a wealth of material, enabling them to better understand and represent historical events-it is the soul of history painting. It also aids in grasping the personality traits of historical figures, making the characters more vivid and three-dimensional. Importantly, historical truth and artistic truth are not contradictory but mutually reinforcing. In the creation of history paintings, they intertwine and work together to form compelling historical imagery.

In the painting *The Founding Ceremony of the Nation*, a work of profound historical significance, artist Dong Xiwen approached every element with meticulous attention to historical accuracy. From the figures to their clothing and architectural details, he strove for a high degree of fidelity to historical fact. In the image, Chairman Mao is depicted wearing a Zhongshan suit, standing atop Tiananmen Gate-an image that aligns precisely with historical records. Likewise, the arrangement of the parade and the architectural features of Tiananmen Square are carefully reconstructed based on abundant historical photographs and documentary evidence [6,7].

Similarly, in *The Nanjing Massacre*, artist Li Zijian transports viewers back to that harrowing historical moment through detailed depictions of victims’ clothing, facial expressions, and bodily postures. In order to faithfully restore the historical reality, Li sought out elderly survivors of the massacre as references for his figures. While in the United States, he also searched extensively for photographs and written materials that documented the atrocities. His painting stands not only as a “historical witness” but also as a powerful reminder to future generations.

In history painting, to faithfully represent historical truth, artists must base their work on historical facts. This requires rigorous verification of the depicted events, figures, and settings using official historical records and archaeological findings. They must also reconstruct the social atmosphere of the era through an understanding of its cultural customs, architectural styles, and broader societal context. The appearance, expressions, and demeanor of characters must align with historical prototypes, and their behavior should be appropriate to the cultural and temporal context. This ensures greater accuracy in character depiction and imbues history paintings with both historical value and educational significance [6].

Although history painting belongs to the domain of artistic creation, it must not forsake historical truth in pursuit of stylistic uniqueness or exaggeration. Nor should it introduce illogical elements solely for the sake of visual impact. Striking a balance between fidelity to historical truth and the artist’s personal expression remains an ongoing challenge and pursuit in the creation of history paintings.

4. THE EMBODIMENT OF ARTISTIC TRUTH IN THE CREATION OF HISTORY PAINTINGS

The creation of history paintings is not a simple replication of historical events. Since artists have neither witnessed nor experienced the actual historical scenes they depict, this very limitation provides space for the expression of artistic truth. If historical truth represents objective reality, then artistic truth is the artist's interpretative understanding of historical events—a subjective reflection infused with the artist's unique perspective, emotional engagement, and creative insight. It is this artistic truth that breathes life and emotional power into history paintings.

Tong Qingbing once noted that “real life provides the original prototype and inspiration for literary creation—an inexhaustible source. However, artistic truth reveals the internal essence and inevitability of social life through ‘historical rationality,’ reflecting a pursuit of truth as an aesthetic value, and manifesting in the hypothetical contexts created by the artist.” When producing works based on historical themes, artists must not only remain faithful to historical facts but also delve into the emotional and cultural significance behind these events. To enhance the emotional impact and credibility of their work, artists may reasonably imagine and reconstruct certain details based on a deep understanding of and respect for historical facts. In doing so, artistic truth transcends temporal and spatial boundaries, connecting the past with the present. Through the artist's unique lens, history painting becomes not only a reflection on the past but also a commentary on contemporary society and a vision of possible futures. In this process, artistic truth serves as a bridge between history and the present, tradition and modernity. It opens up a broad imaginative space for viewers and inspires deeper reflection on the relationship between history and reality—thus becoming a sublimation of historical truth [6,7,8].

The incorporation of symbolism, metaphor, and suggestive narrative elements is a commonly used technique in history painting and a key means of expressing artistic truth. In *Setting Sail—The First National Congress of the Communist Party of China*, created by He Hongzhou and Huang Faxiang, Mao Zedong is placed at the center of the composition. The looming dark clouds overhead suggest an imminent storm and symbolically represent the oppressive social environment of the time. Meanwhile, the distant rays of dawn merge with the congress delegates, metaphorically indicating the emerging light of revolution. The stark contrast between darkness and light, the pressure of storm clouds, and the delegates' firm resolve collectively highlight the hardships of the revolution and the fearless spirit of the Party's founders [8,9].

Similarly, *Yellow River Cantata*, painted by Zhan Jianjun and Ye Nan in 2009, uses symbolic techniques to convey artistic truth. The triptych format—with a vertical central panel flanked by two horizontal side panels—adopts a monument-like composition that enhances the symbolic meaning of the work. The left panel, *Exile*, features a cascading river flowing rapidly forward, symbolizing the turbulent fate of the Chinese nation. The right panel, *Resistance*, uses angular, triangular lines to create a sense of confrontation, with surging waves representing the grandeur of the Yellow River and the rising spirit of national awakening. The central panel, *Uprising*, uses romanticized imagery of Hukou Waterfall, filled with symbolic power, to praise the Chinese people's unstoppable determination to overcome their enemies—just like the relentless rush of the Yellow River [9].

Although we cannot fully know the specific details of history, artists use their imagination, based on limited photographs and textual sources, to transcend the constraints of historical truth and open up new possibilities for creation. This allows their works to achieve an artistic effect that goes beyond historical accuracy. Furthermore, by incorporating the current social environment and cultural context, artists attempt to imbue historical scenes with new contemporary significance. Through this process of reinterpreting historical events, artists uncover the relevance and value of past experiences for today's society, making history painting a unique and powerful artistic form.

5. THE BALANCE BETWEEN HISTORICAL TRUTH AND ARTISTIC TRUTH

From a philosophical perspective, historical truth and artistic truth in the creation of history paintings exist in both opposition and unity. The opposing aspect lies in three key differences:

First, their nature differs. Historical truth emphasizes the accurate recording and restoration of past objective facts, based on rigorous historical research and verification. Artistic truth, on the other hand, encourages the artist to exercise subjective initiative-infusing the work with personal emotions, imagination, and creative interpretation to convey aesthetic ideals and emotional resonance [10].

Second, their forms of expression differ. Historical truth is presented through objective forms such as historical texts, archival documents, and archaeological discoveries. Artistic truth is expressed through painting, literature, film, and other artistic media, using techniques like exaggeration, metaphor, and symbolism. The language and form of expression are more flexible and focused on aesthetic and emotional experience [12,13,14].

Third, they differ in temporal constraints. Historical truth is confined to events that occurred in the past, within a clearly defined timeframe. Artistic truth, though often set against a historical backdrop, can transcend the limitations of time and space, allowing for the fusion and reconfiguration of various historical elements to create entirely new artistic contexts [12].

The aspect of unity lies in the idea that artistic truth, in some sense, deepens and elevates historical truth. Through in-depth research and understanding, artists internalize historical reality, transforming it into their own emotions and thoughts, and then expressing it through artistic means. Such works do not merely transmit historical information-they breathe new life into historical truth through artistic interpretation [14,15].

In practice, finding the balance between historical and artistic truth is a significant challenge for artists. On one hand, they must conduct thorough historical research to ensure that historical elements in their work are accurate and reliable. On the other, they must also utilize creativity and imagination to imbue the work with artistic appeal. Achieving this balance often requires a solid foundation in both historical knowledge and artistic skill [11,16].

The interaction between historical and artistic truth is not always harmonious. At times, artists may make deliberate adjustments to historical facts to achieve desired artistic effects. For example, the article “May Fourth Photography: The Problem of Association, Appropriation, and Authenticity in Visual Representation” discusses how images, while conveying historical information, may also introduce bias or misunderstanding. Such adjustments may be controversial among historians, but in artistic creation, they are often essential tools for expressing personal viewpoints and emotions [12].

The interplay between historical truth and artistic truth in history painting is a complex and nuanced relationship. Artists must remain faithful to historical reality while also pursuing their individual artistic vision. This dynamic not only enriches the expressive forms of history painting but also offers new perspectives for understanding history.

6. CONCLUSION

In the creation of history paintings, the balance between historical truth and artistic truth is not fixed or rigid. Instead, it must be flexibly adjusted according to the content, purpose, and intended audience of the work. Therefore, artists must respect the foundation of historical facts, conduct in-depth research on historical materials, follow the broader historical framework, apply artistic imagination appropriately, enrich the details, adjust primary and secondary elements, and maintain a correct value orientation.

The first principle is to value the role of historical documentation. By drawing inspiration from historical sources, artists can employ imagination and creativity. This requires extensive preliminary work-such as sketches, drafts, and color studies-which are essential for developing an ideal plan through time and experience.

Secondly, it is crucial to preserve artistic independence and an innovative spirit. Artists should cultivate unique perspectives and insights rather than blindly follow trends or popular styles. They should have the courage to explore new subjects and constantly seek out fresh techniques to breathe new life into their work.

The third principle emphasizes the educational function and aesthetic value of historical painting. History paintings are not merely reproductions of past events but also serve as a means to educate and inspire the public. Therefore, while accurately conveying historical facts, artists should also focus on the artistic expression of their work, striving to create pieces that possess both educational significance and artistic appeal.

Fourth, it is important to consider the audience's needs and level of reception. The audience for historical painting includes not only professional historians and researchers but also a broad base of art enthusiasts. As such, the artist must strike a balance between these different audience groups, ensuring the work is accessible, understandable, and appreciated by a wider public.

In conclusion, when dealing with traditional historical themes, the artist's ability to skillfully strike a balance between historical facts and artistic expression is key to creating works that are both historically meaningful and artistically compelling. Such creations not only help restore the true appearance of past eras but also prompt viewers to reflect deeply on history and foster an emotional connection with it.

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