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Minor Paintings

Generally speaking, artworks that are small in scale, nimble in technique, and meaningful in content are generally considered minor. Let us illustrate by talking about music! The Polish pianist Frédéric Chopin and the French Impressionist Claude Debussy composed impromptus and waltzes in light tempos and with elegant melodies that delighted and captivated many souls. Their works are a kind of minor musical tune. In literature, the late Ming literary scholar Yuan Zhonglang (袁中郎) and the eminent modern writer Lu Xun (鲁迅) wrote minor prose pieces that are short, poignant, and refreshing.1 These, too, can be considered vignettes. The paintings, pastels, prints, and watercolours of the West; miniature paintings of India and Iran; ukiyoe of Japan; and calligraphy albums, hand screens and small hanging scrolls of China can all be classified as minor paintings. The reason for this is their limited size, the delicate technique involved, and their grace and vigour.

Oil paintings are large, heavy and open to the most permutations. They could be immeasurable in size, with room for careful and compact compositions, substantial and complex content, and grandness of expression. Oil paintings can also be small such that they are suitable for portraying the many states of life, exuding a pure and leisurely appeal. We may regard such paintings, then, as minor paintings.

The distinction between a minor painting and a draft is sometimes clear and other times, indistinct. Let us talk about Huang Binhong (黄宾虹). In his twilight years, Binhong toured both sides of the Yangtze River, from north to south. He also visited the Five Great Mountains and Three Gorges, scouring the land for subject matter, making drafts as he went along.4 His countless landscape paintings, even as loose copies, are interesting minor paintings.

The great seventeenth-century Belgian artist Peter Paul Rubens had an unusual habit when painting. He would first use oil paint to make a small draft before handing it over to his protégés to enlarge it accordingly. Sometimes, the work was divided among two or three people according to the subjects they specialised in, such as figures, scenes of nature, or costumes and ornaments. Rubens never interfered until the last stage, when he would personally touch up the work. Then, a much anticipated masterpiece would finally be born. However, the very initial draft of this work is also an excellent minor painting.

During the Second World War, Pablo Picasso painted a large oil painting, Guernica (1937), to expose Germany’s ruthless bombing of a small Spanish village. In preparation, he made several thousand samples. Some were detailed analyses of people and animals, others were conceptualisations of entire compositions. They are as disorderly as a bundle of rice sheaves in the field — true drafts.

Picasso has always been known for his profound skills and bold styles. Many of his famous works are large pieces, such as The War (1952), Peace (1952), Joy of Life (1945), and Guernica. These are considered the most representative artworks of this century and are also comparable to all the masterpieces in the history of art. Similarly, the several pieces of Three Women at the Spring which Picasso painted during his Rose Period and the several still lifes from his Cubist Period are as small as a sketchbook. However, the power within them is full and exuberant; the liveliness and vigour of expression, truly breathtaking. They suggest the outstanding personality of an artist and are proof of his persistence.

China’s Tang Yan (唐寅) and Wen Zhengming (文征明) painted serene and mysterious scenes of rocks, mountains, hills, rivers and waterfalls on fan-shaped silk. These are also an exemplification of the saying that the big picture can be seen in the tiniest detail.

A minor painting is usually a by-product created during the artist’s spare time, as leisurely pursuit or a means of regulating one’s tastes. Western artists have produced such paintings. Examples include Édouard Manet’s painting of a piece of meat, Pierre Renoir’s drawing of two fish out of a cage, Vincent van Gogh’s portrayal of a pair of worn-out and dusty leather shoes, and Paul Gauguin’s depiction of a few ripe bananas.

In the East, minor paintings flourished because their aesthetic favours charm over form and the imaginary over reality. It might be said that anyone who knows how to write with a brush can make a couple of pretentious paintings of plum blossoms, orchids, bamboos, and chrysanthemum, or write verses like “Moon Over a Quiet Lake in Autumn” (平湖秋月) or “Jackdaw on an Old Tree” (古木寒鸦).
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The minor paintings of Ba Da Shan Ren (八大山人) are simple and tranquil, possessing a loftiness that is detached from this world. Even his larger paintings sometimes carry the flavour of minor paintings. The 30-page album of landscape paintings by Shi Tao (石涛) displays simple brushstrokes which are carefree but have a philosophical air about them. They reveal how the artist has reached the realm of selflessness. Ren Bonian (任伯年) has the most varied and interesting subjects, with flowers and birds being his best. Qi Baishi (齐白石) is unparalleled in the way he imbues animals like fish, prawns, and worms with life and vivacity. Many of Xu Beihong’s (徐悲鸿) large paintings were drafted before being painted accordingly, and inevitably appear mechanical and restricted. However, his minor paintings were painted spontaneously. His portrayals of cats and ducks are relaxed, natural, and delightful. Liu Haisu (刘海粟) does not usually produce minor paintings but would sometimes relent upon requests by friends. Nevertheless, his usual air of boundless vitality persists in his minor paintings.

After Henri Matisse turned 80, he spent most of his time in bed. To relieve his boredom, he cut and pasted colourful papers. What resulted were bright and attractive minor designs full of foreign appeal, heralding a new era of collage art.

In the last few months of his life, Picasso simply treated art as play, and scrawled without purpose. Sometimes innocent and unaffected like a child, he drew fruits, people and animals that looked kooky and childlike. Yet, sometimes humankind’s basic sexual desires emerged, and he painted scenes of eroticism, even including men and women in various positions of the sexual act. Undoubtedly, all these minor paintings will become unrivalled treasures.

In short, minor paintings have an inseparable relationship with large works. They can actually be seen as the artist’s X-ray — a transparent revelation of the artist. Minor paintings are also advantageous in that they allow artists complete emotional release, freeing them from convention and enabling them to fully explore new technical paradigms. Most of the time, they discover unexpected secrets along the way. In the popularisation of art, minor paintings are more affordable and therefore more acceptable to the public. This is especially so as modern homes have lower and smaller spaces, and are more suited for smaller artworks. However, in terms of artistic value, minor paintings are not without their disadvantages. The minor painting is, ultimately, restricted by space and does not give full play to the artist’s vision and talent. Da Vinci’s The Last Supper, Raphael’s The School of Athens (1511), Michelangelo’s The Last Judgement (1541), Rembrandt’s The Night Watch (1642), Delacroix’s Liberty Leading the People (1830) and Monet’s Water Lilies (1916) are great compositions based on wall size. Once the artist has decided on a theme, he racks his brain and focuses his effort on arranging the scenery appropriately, shaping the essential human figure, and concocting a harmonious ambience. Most importantly, he instils his subjective thoughts and emotions into the painting to forge an entirely new and unique style. This series of tricks cannot be seen in minor paintings. This is the reason Michelangelo never attempted minor paintings.

ENDNOTES
1 Yuan Zhonglang is also known as Yuan Hongdao (袁宏道).
2 These are, namely, Taishan (泰山), Huashan (华山), Songshan (嵩山), Hengshan (衡山) in Hunan, and Hengshan (恒山) in Shanxi.
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