

# Study on Fengmian Lin's Painting Style and Development

Ming Lin \*

Nanjing Normal University Taizhou College, Jiangsu, Taizhou, 225300

## Abstract

*Lin Fengmian integrates China and the West, connects ancient and modern, advocates western learning for practical application, and is the founder of modern Chinese painting. This article studies Fengmian Lin's works from a historical perspective, analyzes his unique artistic language through comparison and examples, and explores the development trajectory of his painting style and the deep reasons behind the Fengmian Style.*

## Keywords

*Fengmian Lin; Drawing in square paper; Colorful ink; Lines.*

## Text

Looking back on the history of Chinese painting in the past 100 years, for painters, the study of painting form language is a basic skill, but those who can achieve extraordinary achievements in the exploration of painting form language can be said to be very few. It is precisely because Fengmian Lin has persisted in exploring the formal language of painting all his life that the Fengmian Style as we know it today was born. He is a model of fusion of Chinese and Western art—his paintings have been generally regarded as "a fusion of Chinese and Western art"[1]. In some extent, Lin's contribution to Chinese painting is epoch-making and he is comparable to Cezanne in the West.

## 1. The formation of Fengmian Style

On November 22, 1900, Fengmian Lin was born in a mountain village on the bank of the river in Meixian County, Guangdong, named Aqin. Later, his teacher named him Shaoqiong Lin, and he renamed himself Shaoqun Lin and Fengming Lin. After he arrived in France, he changed his name to Fengming Lin and finally named Fengmian Lin.

Fengmian Lin has studied painting since he was a child. He hopes to express what he sees and feels. When Fengmian Lin was five years old (1904), his father taught him to copy "Mustard Seed Garden Painting Book". Children's artistic hobbies will inevitably prompt parents to pay more attention to cultivating children's artistic interests. Later, Fengmian Lin recalled: "I have been very interested in painting since I was a child. It doesn't take much to say that everyone will believe it. Otherwise, I would never have been working hard in painting for more than 20 years. "[2] In this copying, Fengmian Lin received the enlightenment education of traditional Chinese painting art. In July 1989, Fengmian Lin wrote in a self-report in Hong Kong: "Now, I am at the age of my grandfather. Although I dare not say that I am as industrious as him, I

have never put down my paintbrush for no reason. After a wealth of life experience, I hope to use my sincerity and my brush to describe my feelings forever." [3]

In middle school, Fengmian Lin was encountering the rise of Lingnan School. Lingnan School grafted the perspective, chromatics and sketching techniques of the Japanese Civilization Restoration with the traditional Chinese painting, and produced a style different from that of its predecessors. It was against the background of this era, on December 26, 1919, with More than 30 people, including Jianhao Cai, Chang Cai, and Jingyu Xiang, went to France for work-study programs.

In France, Fengmian Lin entered the Dijon Academy of Fine Arts where Yancesse was the dean to study sketching. Later, introduced by Yancesse, he entered the Coromant Studio of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris to study sketching and body oil painting. Under the influence of his tutor Yancesse, Fengmian Lin focused on studying in major museums in Paris, and experienced China's own most precious artistic nutrients in the Oriental Museum and Ceramic Museum, where, his idea of Neutralization of Chinese philosophy was inspired, and the idea of "Inclusive" learning art of painting was sprouted.

Among Fengmian Lin's early works, such as "Groping", "The Desire of Life", "The Crying Sea", "The Drunkenness of Berlin", "Golden Carriage", etc., are the works that he spent a lot of effort and subconsciously completed. After studying the Chinese cultural heritage that cannot be seen in the country, he entered the embryonic stage of "Inclusiveness" painting art. Among them, "Groping" is the early art manifesto of Fengmian Lin and his partners, and the crystallization of his early ideas and art, while the work "Desire of Life" combines Western romantic techniques with Chinese themes and pen and ink effects. This is a typical work that embodies the gloomy mind of a young nationalist painter. After returning to China, Fengmian Lin again "in the spirit of sacrificing, "struggling endlessly, always forgetting the painstaking effort of the art movement", turned his artistic creation to the complex and cruel domestic reality, and created "The World", "Human suffering", "Humanity", "Struggle" and other huge oil paintings. In the work of school running, art creation, and art exhibitions, Fengmian Lin published "A Letter to the National Art Circle", devoted himself to the study of the history of Chinese painting, and successively published "A Brief History of Chinese Painting", "New Theory of Chinese Painting", "The Future of Chinese Painting I Want", and put forward the school mission of Hangzhou National Art College of "introducing Western art, organizing Chinese art, reconciling Chinese and Western art, and creating contemporary art". [4] On July 7, 1937, when the Hangzhou National Art College was about to celebrate its tenth anniversary, the Lugou Bridge Incident occurred in Beijing, and the Japanese war of aggression against China broke out. Fengmian Lin could only lead the entire school's teachers and students to evacuate Hangzhou.

In 1939, Fengmian Lin left the Hangzhou National Art College and lived in seclusion on the banks of the Jialing River in Chongqing. He began to live like an ascetic monk. In his paintings, he also began to use large brushes to depict the mountains and rivers in the areas of Xiangxi and Guizhou. During this period, he made choices and abandons in pen, ink and color, abandoning some stylized descriptions and methods, and introduced light and color into his works, but abandoned the rigid rules of the academic school. On his way of integrating Chinese and Western styles, he chose some traditions of Romanticism and Cubism, and the line material in the folk art of the Han and Tang Dynasties in ancient China, especially the

traditional elements of portrait brick and folk art. In Fengmian Lin's view, the integration of the color and composition of Chinese painting is of greater significance to fundamentally shake the unchanging formula of Chinese painting for thousands of years. It was from this period that Fengmian Lin almost gave up all oil painting creations and specialized in the research of ink painting.

The exploration along the Jialing River was the formation period of Fengmian Lin's "Fengmian Style". He changed the realistic technique of the past art movement period, and gradually changed from symbolism to expression, from realism to freehand brushwork. He also changed the symbolic language of impressionism, Fauvism and expressionism during his stay in France, and tried to combine Western colors with Oriental lines coexist in the picture. From the representative works of this period such as "Still Life", "Composition", "Celosia" and other works, Fengmian Lin's works gradually turned from the dark tones which is popular in the art movement period to bright colors. From the rectangular composition of a picture such as in "The Desire of Life" to the square composition, he strives to expound Western oil paintings in Eastern language, and innovates ink paintings with modern techniques. From this period, Fengmian Lin chose square paper for his paintings. He deliberately abandoned scrolls and vertical scrolls, because square paper was also a form of composition in Song dynasty's painting that Fengmian Lin believed was more modern and tense. It also reflected his own psychological tranquility and balance during the seclusion period. In his works of this period, the thematic paintings that directly express social contradictions and the p"drawing in square paper" is an important feature of "Fengmian Style", and it is also the first change that Fengmian Lin has completely bid farewell to traditional literati paintings since the Ming and Qing Dynasties.ain of life disappeared. Instead, landscapes, ladies, flowers and birds, and still lifes were replaced. They can be appropriately expressed in the focal perspective of square paper.

In 1933, Fengmian Lin stated in his article "The Future of Chinese Painting We Want" that in order to change the decline of Chinese painting, we must start from three points: first, it must be based on natural phenomena, and the image must be accurate; second, a variety of materials and tools must be trialed so as to develop a new painting tool; third, pursue the simplicity and freehand drawing of painting. Based on these three points, Fengmian Lin creatively improved the raw materials, techniques and methods of painting, completely breaking the traditional imitation and plagiarism. After exploring soft pens, hard pens, brushes, raw paper, cooked paper, foreign paper, and industrial paper, he finally returned to traditional Chinese media with colors and gouache paints. In the process of thousands of exploratory paintings, Fengmian Lin experimented with dry brushes and direct painting methods. When Fengmian Lin was studying abroad, he noticed the two schools of Western painting: realism represented by Miller and impressionism represented by Monet. He absorbed the modeling of realism and weakened the rigid architectural structure. He absorbed the colors of impressionism and weakened the fuzzy edge lines, that is, he absorbed the physical pursuit of Western paintings and unrestrained colors, and blended watercolor, water pink and ink. In his works of "Heron Series" and "Lady Seies", ink only exists in his works as a kind of black pigment. In the works of this period, his favorite crows, black fishing boats, black pine forests, and women in black have all eliminated the traditional pen and ink and the creed of "Ink and wash first" and "Chinese ink are divided into five colors".

## 2. The Formal Language of "Fengmian Style" in the Mature Period

After returning to China for two years in Beijing, ten years in Hangzhou, eight years in Chongqing, and after the accumulation and exploration of twenty years of hard work, Fengmian Lin has truly and for the first time completely got rid of the shackles and pressure of ink and wash after finishing the "Pain" group of paintings. He is absolutely free to project his inspiration into the picture, and there are a wide range of character painting themes such as "Lady in Blue", "Lady in Red", "Lady in Green", "Lady in Black", and "Fengmian Style" is finally formed. In these works, the pain and hell are gone, the etherealness of the East has swallowed the colors of the West, and the darkness has turned into a light and clean.

In 1951, after Fengmian Lin resigned as a professor in the East China Branch of the Central Academy of Fine Arts, he worked as a full-time painter for the Fine Arts Association in Shanghai and began selling paintings for a living. This was his second reclusive life in Shanghai after he lived in Chongqing during the Anti-Japanese War. From Hangzhou to Shanghai, Fengmian Lin's lifestyle has completely changed. Withdrawing from the public realm of school education, his personal life makes his artistic creation closer to private exploration. In Shanghai after 1950, as Fengmian Lin said, "This is a city with fast pace lifestyle" [5], he began to think about how to make paintings reflect the sense of the times. Due to the influence of Shanghai artist friends, Fengmian Lin began to pay attention to drama. He often watched Peking Opera, Kunqu Opera and Yue Opera with Guan Liang. In Fengmian Lin's view, he watched the show not purely for spiritual enjoyment. He had to write down the distinctive costumes and props, as well as the colors and characteristics of the characters, and reorganize the picture when he returned. When absorbing the culture of opera, in addition to learning and recording the modeling symbols of opera characters. The concept of time and space in Chinese opera has also had a great influence on Fengmian Lin's creation. He superimposed the characters in the story one after another in the play in the same work, pursuing the sense of continuity through clothing, dynamics, lines and colors. Therefore he created Cubist color ink paintings of Oriental modern art such as "Universe Front", "Southern Heaven Gate", and "Farewell My Concubine". As Fengmian Lin said in a letter to his student Qiliu Pan, "I have understood Western modern art represented by Cubism among the quintessence art that I disliked or even advocated its elimination."

In the works of this period, Fengmian Lin also claimed that the style of painting has changed drastically. In the draft of the work "Shanbo Liang and Yingtai Zhu", Fengmian Lin intentionally compressed the relationship between the front and the back from the spatial structure, and strengthened the role of geometric lines in the picture cutting. In the 1959 works "Women Generals of the Yang Family" and "Farewell My Concubine", although the background leaves a large blank, the expressive power of colors is strengthened. From the deep colors of the characters' clothing and the flat processing techniques in the works, Fengmian Lin not only borrowed the elements of Western Cubism, but also absorbed the essence of Eastern folk art. This shadow-like figure modeling and combination in his paintings shows the beauty of recombination and superposition in Cubist painting. In 1963's "Universe Front", the contrast between black and white is quite strong, and the dark color tone is used. The figure outlined by the white line weakened the original relatively blunt geometric figure. He began to strengthen the color of the character, therefore the shape became more vivid, and

the generalization of the line was also given full play. Compared with Liang Guan, the more prominent author of opera figure paintings, Liang Guan pays more attention to the details of the characters and the meaning outside the picture, showing the leisurely and natural attitude in literati paintings, while Fengmian Lin pays more attention to it. He was looking for the formal language of "Fengmian Style". He was inspired by Dunhuang frescos and porcelain paintings with strong lines and black-and-white layouts, transformed into free and easy natural landscape paintings, as well as portrait paintings with the theme of ladies. In the refinement and exploration of Chinese Cubism, heavy colors, simple and abstract shapes are used to show the unique innovation of "Western style in Chinese" colorful ink painting.

### **3. The final "Fengmian Style"**

Fengmian Lin's "Fengmian Style" works when living in seclusion on the banks of the Jialing River may still have heavy brushstrokes and lack transparency. However, after moving to Shanghai, Fengmian Lin has completed works like "Autumn Scenery", "Autumn Forest" and "Green Mountain". He melted the strong colors into ink language, and showed the poetic loneliness and stubborn appreciation as well as his unique realm of life.

After Fengmian Lin arrived in Hong Kong in 1977, he lived in simplicity and lived a life of isolation from the outside world. At the beginning, he also made some inertial development along the trajectory of painting in Chongqing and Shanghai, but after returning from the exhibition in Paris, his painting entered a colorful world. In addition to ladies and flowers and birds, the themes with Christ and the nuns are added. His painting style has become more unrestrained and free, and it seems that the power of calling and wailing in the oil paintings of the early art movement period has appeared. During this period, he created landscape paintings such as "Huangshan", "Rivers and Mountains", "Dawn" and "Landscape". In this batch of works, he differs from the previous ink painters in that there are no misty seas of clouds and Qingdai mountains. The woods, mountains and rocks in the work nurtured a deep power. Fengmian Lin is still devouring the colors of the West with the charm of the East. He used the brush wildly, with passionate colors, and wonderfully managed to be orderly in an irresistible and disorderly manner.

During his Shanghai period, he had explored the cubism-themed figure paintings of opera themes, and great changes have taken place at this time. In the paintings of "Baolian Lantern" and "Nightmare", works such as "Christ", "Qu Yuan", "Burning Red Cliff", "Universe Front", "Nan Tianmen", etc., some parts of the pictures use thin colors, some take dry brushes, while others prefer thick piles. In the use of colors, cuts and lines, especially in "Burning Chibi" and "Nan Tian Men", there is a tragic power revealed. Just as Fengmian Lin said: "It was a feeling, a memory, and a period of time. I often have nightmares, so drawing is a nightmare." After bidding farewell to subjective painting for more than half a century, Fengmian Lin finally used Chinese painting to involve the theme of painting into the theme of human destiny, which is concerned with life and society. His great sorrows and sadness are confided in each inspiring work, which contains a strong humanitarian spirit.

### **4. Conclusion**

Fengmian Lin is one of the important founders of modern Chinese art education. He is rigorous in his studies and have students all over the country. In art, he not only blends Chinese and Western, but also connects ancient and modern. Through his lifelong efforts in advocating "Western style in Chinese", his unique "Fengmian Style" formal language, such as "drawing in square paper", "mix oriental ink with western color", "use of new lines" and lyrical works, etc. are all embodied with an extremely distinctive artistic personality, just like Chao Zheng's summary of Fengmian Lin's artistic achievements: "Fengmian Lin opened up a new path for contemporary Chinese painting, broadened the scope of expression of Chinese painting, fused Western aesthetic appeal, and invested the language of Chinese painting cosmopolitan. "[6]History objectively pushed him to a watershed position in the history of Chinese painting development, namely, Chinese painting before Fengmian Lin and Chinese painting after Fengmian Lin. He likened the artist's growth process to "pupa turning into a butterfly." He said, "A real artist is like a beautiful butterfly. At the beginning, it was just a squirming little caterpillar. To fly, it must first weave a cocoon for itself, and bind itself to it. After that, it must undergo a major change in the body to recombine the structure of the body and complete the transformation. Finally and most importantly, it must have the ability to break out of its shell, so that it can become a free flying, colorful butterfly in the sky. This cocoon is the technique and the influence the artist has learned through hard work in his early years." [7] Fengmian Lin is such a well-deserved master who has achieved perfect unity of his works in inheritance and innovation.

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