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THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN TIME FACTOR AND  
FIGURATIVE FACTOR IN CHINESE AND ITALIAN FIGURE  
PAINTING IN THE 15TH CENTURY

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**Abstract:**

The Time factor used or emerged in painting is an issue that has been discussed for almost 1 century. However, there has never been any specific study related to time and figure painting. In addition, the author finds the time factor used in Italian and Chinese painting in the 15th century, which always depends on the figurative factor of the painting. So, this study is to explore the presentation of time factors in figure paintings in Italy and China from the 15th century to the 16th century and find out the rules between figurative factors and time factors in figure painting during this period.

**Keywords:**

Time Factor; Figure Painting; Figurative Factor

## Introduction

Since the development of image, perhaps we have become accustomed to conveying a sense of time flexibly in contemporary visual art but paying little attention to the time factor conveyed by the static image form of traditional easel painting. Part of the reason is that the forerunners of art theory had conceptualized painting as the art of space, and music as the art of time, which was a simple distinction between the two art forms of the bearing medium. Such a distinction limited the historical research and development of the time factors in artistic creation. (Chen Danqing 2018)

However, Modern artists and art historians such as David Hockney (1937) and Danielle Arras (1944-2003) discovered and affirmed the significance of the time factor in painting in the study of history. They believe that good paintings not only encompass time, but also create time, after a painting is finished, it is possessed by time, and still moves with time (Hockney, D 1986). Although the time factor in modern video art seems more common and obvious than in paintings or sculptures, when we are trying to find the source, it was which be used in painting at first. During ancient times, stories were represented by paintings. Even though painters didn't necessarily think of the time in their paintings, it is obvious that we can find multiple time periods (figure 1) or a single time period (Figure 2) in pictures. This awareness has led to today's videos, photography, paintings, and so on.



**Figure 1: The Life of St. Catherine.Fresco. Masolino da Panicale.**



**Figure 2: Impression Sunrise.Oil Painting. Oscar-Claude Monet.**

On the other hand, the author found in previous research that the reason why the existence of figurative factors in figure painting is inevitable is that the identification requirements for the characters of the picture, while figure painting often carries many time factors to meet the requirements of narration and concept transmission. So, whether the figurative factors in figure painting are necessarily related to the time factors, and if so, what is the inherent rule?

To sum up, this study is to explore the figurative factors in the easel figure paintings and the time factors in painting in Italy and China During the 15th century, to sort out and analyze the concrete embodiment of natural science time in artist's 3 works in this historical periods, and then to discuss the connection among the active expression of the time factors, the unconscious presentation and the figurative factors in their character paintings.

## **Background of Research**

### ***Background Of Research of Time Factor In Paintings***

Essentially, time is divided into natural science time and temporality in philosophy. Natural science time is considered as the moment of the object, which is actually the measurement unit of time and is used to describe the periods or moments of human daily activities. The discovery of temporality marks that people began to pay real attention to individual conscious activities. Temporality is a continuous flow and is the "real-time" behind natural science time. From the perspective of painting, whether figurative or abstract painting, internal timeliness is universal, while external time (moment or period) is often presented as a narrative expression, imply of movement or solidification of a certain time section.

Time in ancient Greek artworks is often expressed as a beautiful moment in the process of extracting the movement of characters, which is used to hint at the past and the future (figure 3); Some of the frescoes of the early Renaissance, and Chinese scroll, present a complete period for the purpose of narrative behavior. For instance, 'The life of St. Catherine', 'Herod's banquet - Salome dance' (figure 4), and modern art in the futurist painting of the movement of the expression of the figures, etc.



**Figure 3: Discobolus.Sculpture.Myron. BC. 450.**



**Figure 4: The Feast of Herod: Salome's Dance.Fresco.c. Filippo Lippi.**

David Hockney (1937) said that, if you want to talk about the relationship between time and painting, this was something that the Chinese really understood. However, the ancient Chinese don't use the word 'time'. (Hockney.D 1986)

The time factor in traditional Chinese figure painting is more obviously reflected in the long scroll painting with narrative. For instance, 'Eighteen Songs of a Nomad Flute' (figure 5), 'Duke Wen of Jin Recovering His State' (figure 6), etc. Time as the carrier of the historical story runs through the whole picture. Previous literati paintings always put the painting and poetry together to form a complete artwork. In such works, in addition to providing information such as seasons, years, sunrises, and sunsets, the content of poems often explains the time periods presented in the paintings by way of narration. The temporality in figure paintings is presented in different ways in different ages and regions.



**Figure 5: Eighteen Songs Of A Nomad Flute (Part). Paper And Ink. Anonymity. Ming Dynasty.**



**Figure 6: Duke Wen of Jin Recovering His State(part). Juan and ink. Li Tang, Song Dynasty**

### ***Background of Research of Figurative Factor in Figure Paintings***

Since the advent of abstract art, the term has been used specifically to refer to artists who retain some aspect of the real world as their subject matter, although in a general sense figurative also applies to all art that looks back before abstract art. It retains references to the real world and particularly to the human figure. For instance, in Renaissance, Baroque, and even Impressionism, no matter how the intention and style of creation changed, the content of the creation was based on real objects, in other words, those paintings all involve varying degrees of figurative factor.

### ***Background of Research of Figure Painting in 15th Century in Italy and China***

The 15th century has been considered as the middle Renaissance of Italy. In addition to the over- publicized masters such as Leonardo Da Vinci, Michelangelo Buonarroti, Raffaello Sanzio, Giovanni Bellini, Jan van Eyck, Albrecht Durer, etc., who filled the Renaissance family tree were the fresco masters of the cathedrals of the various city-states--Masolino da Panicale, Masaccio, Fra Filippo Lippi, Paolo Uccello, Piero della Francesca, etc. As a kind of painting neglected by art history, the Italian frescoes are the real heart of Renaissance painting. The number far exceeds that of easel paintings of that time. Frescoes were painted in countless churches in Italy, and because the size of the picture depending on the size of the wall, artists were allowed to work more freely on the different

shapes of the walls, resulting in more varied compositions and richer character dynamics and plot expressions.

During the Ming Dynasty of China at the same time, painting experienced a series of changes and showed a highly mature appearance. Painting with figures as the main object of expression generally appeared in long scroll paintings and portrait paintings. Although figure painting was always subordinate to landscape painting, the development of the story in the long scroll painting of the Ming Dynasty also gave the painting the thickness of time. In terms of the expression of the time factor, it is similar in form and different in essence from some Italian paintings of the same generation.

### **Problem Statement**

When we were trying to find the source of the time factor in figure paintings, no matter frescoes or easel paintings, it has been confirmed that in Italy, the dynamic of figure and the expression of narrate already began in the 15th century in paintings. At the same time, throughout the 15th century, Italian painting was a process of increasing figurativeness. In Ming Dynasty, the artists described the plot in the form of long scroll paintings, and the picture also presents an obvious sense of the time factor.

However, The relationship between time and painting is not a relatively new issue. Although many theorists and artists have begun to discuss this issue since the last century, it is generally carried out from the perspective of art criticism, but rarely discussed its internal rules from the perspective of creation theory. In addition, If the current artistic creation and theoretical exploration do not trace the source, it will be that we lose our direction and can't figure out what to think in today's artistic environment.

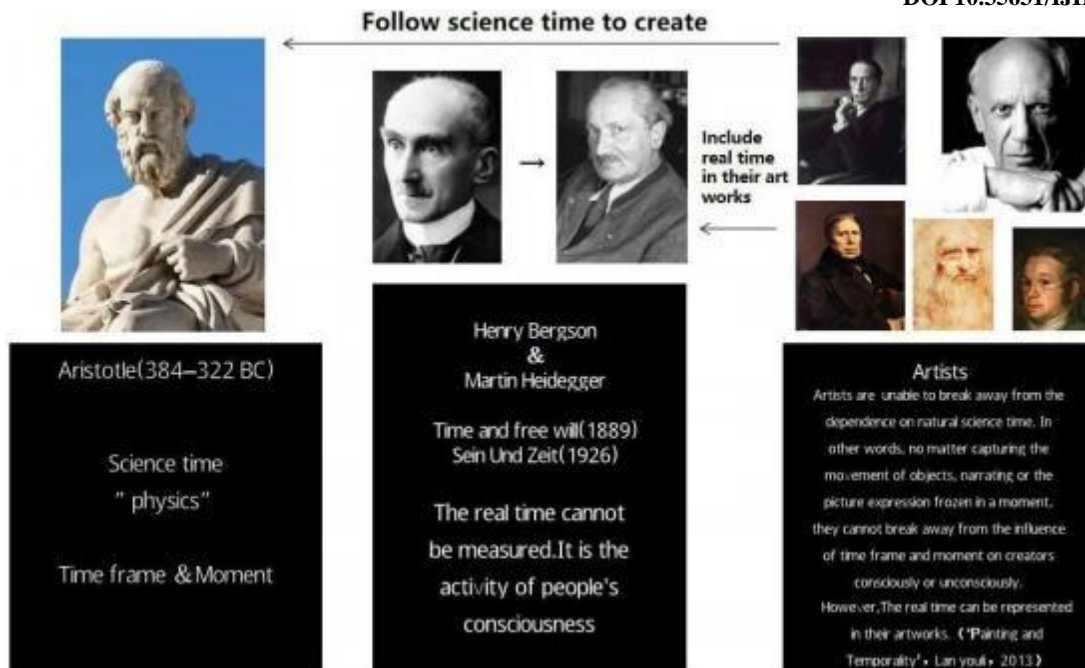
In terms of this issue, the author intends to carry out the study of the time factor in figure painting, which is to research the source of the movement and narrativity expressed in figure painting in the 15th century and the relationship between the time factor and the figurative factor during this period to provide the theoretical basis for future art creation.

### **Literature Review**

In this section, the author sorted out the philosophical research results of time factor and analyzed the theoretical results of figurative factor in figure paintings in the world.

#### ***The Study of Time Factors***

The author sort out the literature in chronological order-from Aristotle (384-322 BC) to Martin Heidegger (1899- 1976). According to their literature, the cognition of time in philosophy has gradually changed from the movement of objects to the understanding of temporality. Based on the knowledge of time, the author sorts out the literature about time factor be used in paintings. (Figure 7)



**Figure 7: The Historical Development Of Time And Temporality. Made by Shi Xueyan.**

### *The Study of Aristotle and Newton*

In ‘physics’ (IV. 10- 14) Aristotle(384-322BC) claims that time is not a kind of change, but that it is something dependent on change. He defines it as a kind of ‘number of change’ with respect to the before and after. It is argued that this means that time is a kind of order (not, as is commonly supposed, that it is a kind of measure). It is a universal order within which all changes are related to each other...(Aristotle, transl 1984:65). Overall, contemporary philosophers attribute his perception of time to the existence of time as the movement of objects.

In ‘Principia’, Newton( 1643- 1727) explains: “The absolute, true, and mathematical time (Latin: tempus) is flowing evenly, by itself and by it’s nature without relation to anything external; it is also called duration (Latin: duratio): The relative, apparent, and common (time) is some (either accurate or only rough) sensible and external measure of duration due to motion (Latin: motum), which commonly is used instead of the true time; like hour, day, month, year.” (Newton. L, 1728:124)

### *The Study of Henri Bergson and Martin Heidegger*

In “Time and Free Will”, Henri Bergson (1895- 1941) started against the theory about the ‘spatializing’ of time. Time factor can be called duration. Duration is a continuous flow, immeasurable and unquantifiable - the ‘ceaselessly seething surd at the heart of things’, in Barrett’s words (Bergson, H, & Anderson, T, 2018).

In “SEIN UND ZEIT”, Heidegger argues that the meaning of time can not simply reducible to the vulgar experience, nor does it originate in distinction from eternity. Time should be

consider as the unity of the future, past and present. And temporality is a process with three dimensions. (Heidegger, M, 1994:302)

### ***The Time Factor In Figure Painting***

In 2013, Lan You-li's (1975) "Painting and Temporality". Part of this book studied the time factors in easel character painting. In the research, he listed the time factor in figure painting in each era in sequence and analyzed how artists' cognition of time in different eras determined the art form at that time. For example, the ancient Greek art captured is the relay point that time extends from the past to the future, which occupies a consistent thickness of time. Roman art is turned to realism, where the time factor is expressed as a tangent plane, not containing a retrospective of the past and the extension to the future, etc. (Youli, L, 2019: 12)

### ***The Figurative Factor In Figure Painting***

Roger Garau ( ) mentioned in the book 'Infinite Realism': "All real works of art are a form of expression of human existence in the world." The conclusion of the book is that "there is no unrealistic art" which means that all the existing artistic results are presented as the artist's reflection of the objective reality. Although realism in painting cannot be equated with figurative painting (realism and writing reality in English are universal realism, the former is ideology, and the latter generally refers to the means of expression in painting. The figurative factor in painting refers to the identifiability of the image in the painting, and the figurative painting is the figurative painting), but the figurative painting can be presented through the artist's imitation of the material in the natural space, while the natural imitation originates from the desire for expression caused by the influence of some objective reality on art. Its discussion side elaborated on the universal existence of the figurative nature of painting. In the creative process of all artists, the existence of this realistic ideology is absolute, and the existence of the concrete factors in the painting brought by the ideology is inevitable. (Zhongming F, 1958:132)

Representative works such as Gombrich's (1909-2001) "The Story of Art", "The History of Art Development" and Bai Zonghua's (1897-1986) "The Course of Beauty" all have specific discussions on the figurative factors of character painting itself.

### ***Figure Paintings In The 15th Century In China And Italy***

In the early Ming dynasty, The most remarkable figure painter was court painters.

Literati painting occupies the mainstream position in Ming Dynasty painting. However, many of them worked on figure paintings at a certain stage of their lives. For instance, Tangyin was a significant painter in 'the Wu School'. In addition to the representative landscape paintings, his works also involve figures. Besides, many outstanding Ming figure painters remain anonymous. (Selected paintings of Ming Dynasty Court and Zhejiang School)

In 'the story of art', E.H. Gombrich claimed that the word renaissance means rebirth or revival, and the idea of such a rebirth had gained ground in Italy ever since the time of Giotto. Giotto had been exalted in this way as a master who had led to a true revival of art; by this, people meant that his art was as good as that of the famous masters whose work they found praised by the ancient writers of Greece and Rome. In addition, he presented



examples of the painter in the 15th century and explained what influenced them to create a new style. Such as the variety of walls in the cathedrals, the requirement of Patrons, and the development of the painting material at that time, etc. It is no doubt that the figurative factors of figure paintings in the 15th century have become more and more obvious.(Gombrich, E.H. 1950: 228)

In ‘Local Perspective’ Chen Danqing showed the frescos in the 15th century in Italy. He argued that, by the time of Masaccio, medieval styles had been swept away. And the new patterns and overall structures of the 15th century had been established. The proportions of the figures are highly accurate, perspective methods have matured, the compositions are starting to become more complex and the details are more lifelike, etc. And he also listed the master in the 15th century (such as Pietro Perugino, Piero della Francesca, Andrea Mantegna, Sandro Botticelli, etc.) and explained how did the figurative factors become more and more apparent in their paintings.

He also used the long scroll painting in Ming Dynasty to explain the time factor and figurative factors in Chinese painting.(Danqing, C,2020:01)

## Research Methods

### *Literature Survey*

This model follows the systematic data processing approach comprised of three steps, namely: (a) literature search and screening; (b) data extraction and analysis; and (c) writing the literature review. They provide detailed and very helpful instructions on how to conduct each step of the review process.

In this research, the literature survey is mainly used to quote the philosophy of time in the 15th century and collect philosophical works after 15th century to sort out and analysis the understanding of time in the mainstream environment from the Renaissance to modern times.

### *Comparative Analysis*

In this study, comparative analysis always be used to compare the concreteness of figure paintings, the similarities and differences between Chinese and Italy paintings, the evolution of paintings in different eras, and the similarities and differences of time factors in the works of different painters in the same era.

The author selected the representative figure paintings of the 15th century in Italy, as well as the Ming Dynasties in China as samples for comparative analysis to find the time factors.

The reason why the author chose the above era and regional painting is that the figure paintings of these times and regions are relatively representative. Figure painting is a huge system in the world. However, it is difficult to find out all kinds of figure paintings. In addition, figure painting in many regions and times is in a relatively subordinate position, for example, in the Chinese Song and Yuan dynasties the painting figures are often used as an ornament of landscape painting. The character's shape even can not be identified, It cannot be compared as a sample.

With the arrival of humanism trend of thought in the Renaissance, Italian painters in the 15th century showed more and more obvious figurativeness in figure painting. Giotto is considered the beginning of this style of painting.(Figure 8) And the degree of figurativeness gradually increased during this period.



**Figure 8: Giotto's Frescoes Contrast With Medieval Frescoes**

Ming dynasty, the figurativeness of figure painting also showed a small improvement. However, compared to the Italian painting in the 15th century, this change is not obvious. Unlike the Renaissance, the improvement of figurative factor of Chinese figure painting in Ming Dynasty was more due to painter's techniques development. Meanwhile, Western figure painting brought by missionaries in the late Ming Dynasty also inspired Chinese painters to some extent. (Figure 9)

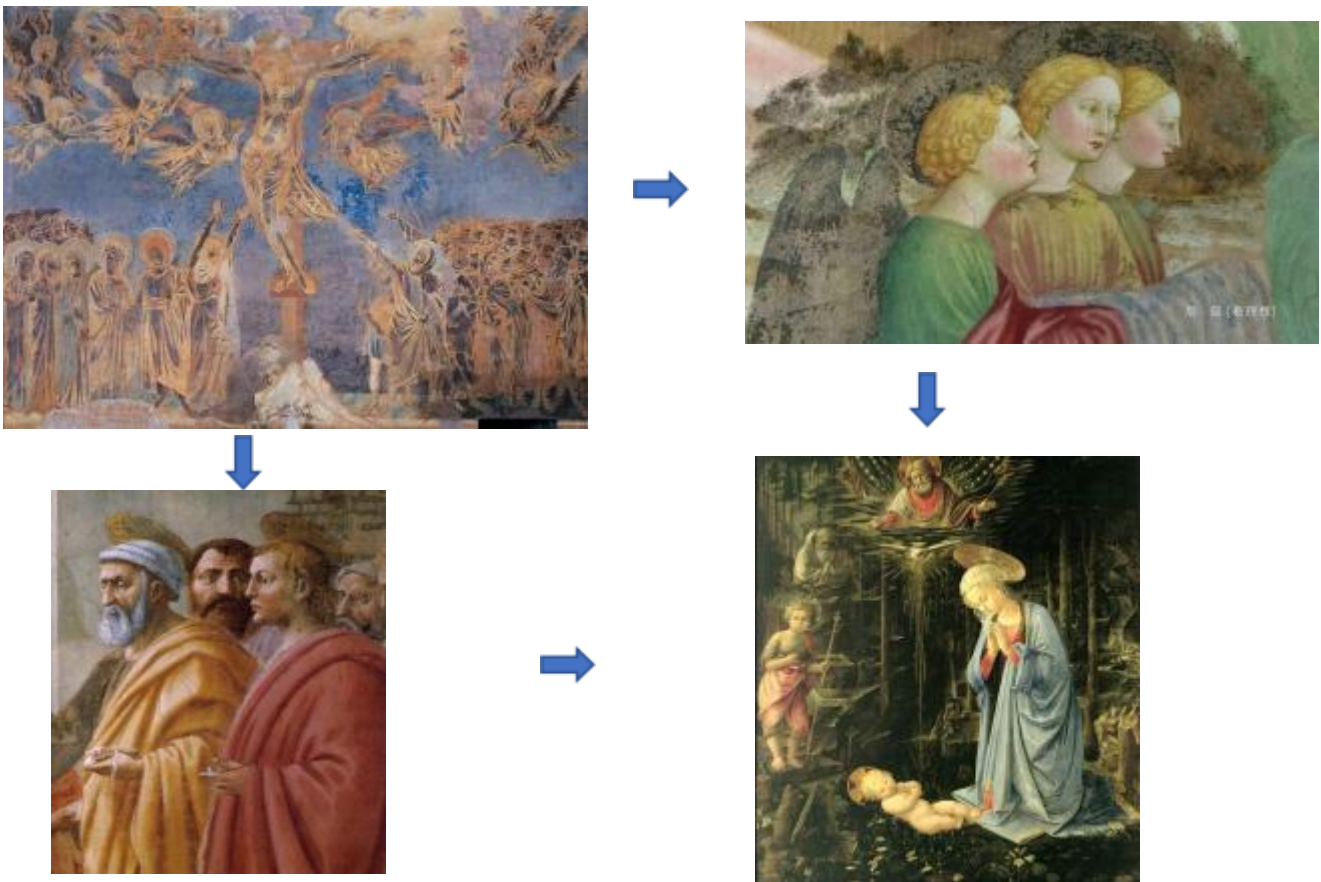


**Figure 9: Yuan Dynasty Wuzhen Figure Painting And Ming Dynasty Tang Yin Figure Painting**

## The Relationship Between Time Factor And Figurative Factor In Figure Painting In Italy And China In The 15th Century

From the above comparative analysis, we can conclude that the figurative factors in Chinese figure paintings and Italian figure paintings in the 15th century have significantly improved with the development of history. Does such improvement affect or promote the expression of picture time factors?

In Italy, the author makes a comparison between the frescoes of the 15th century and those before it. In Italy, the author makes a comparison between the frescoes of the 15th century and those before it. As can be seen from the following pictures, compared with the Middle Ages, the figure paintings of the 15th century gradually enriched the body language of the figures and changed the front perspective of the figures from a single perspective to a free transformation of multiple views with the support of the enhancement of figurative factor. Through the picture, it is easier for us to identify the actions and expressions of the characters in the picture at a certain moment. And then a series of frescoes from different periods in the 15th century. With the improvement of representativeness, the painter gradually began to try to incorporate a sense of time with thickness into the picture. (Figure 10)



**Figure 10: Diagram Of Figurative Evolution Of Frescoes In The 15th Century**

As outlined in the background, ancient Chinese did not use the term time, nor did they think about the relationship between time and movement in terms of Aristotle's time thinking in physics, but they did depict scenes and plots at specific moments in the paintings. Landscape painting is often presented as depiction of the state of objects at a specific moment. (Figure 11) On the other hand, portrait paintings generally do not have the characteristics of specific moments, (Figure 12) and narrative group portraits are generally created with a specific historical event in their time as the theme. It is worth noting that many Chinese long-scroll paintings serve the presentation of stories, and a complete work records many moments to form a complete story, just like comic strips. (Figure 13) and this time thickness is largely dependent on the figurative character. Comparing the Ming Dynasty Longscroll painting with the previous paintings, the concrete level of the characters has been significantly improved. The body language and manner of the characters at different moments in the picture determine the full expression of the story plot, and also support the accuracy of the author's expression of time.



**Figure 10: Landscape Painting by Wen Zhengming**



**Figure 11: Portrait of Ming Dynasty**



Figure 12: Part of Ming Dynasty Long Scroll

### Conclusion

With the improvement of representational factors, the expression of time factors became richer in 15th century Chinese painting and Italian painting. The action and plot of the picture are the carriers of the time factors of the picture, and the presentation of these time factors is inseparable from the concrete factors to support the recognizable character and even the whole picture.

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