

The Analyze on Popular Elements of Calendar Poster in the Early 20th Century

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Abstract

Calendar Poster is a kind of commercial painting popular in China in the early 20th century. In this article, the author has conducted some basic research on it, that is, some popular elements in the creative process of Calendar Poster, such as subject content, regional background and drawing technique. At the same time, the author analyzes the impact of these factors on the Chinese social revolution in the article.

Keywords

Calendar New Year Picture; Month Card; Pop Culture.

1. Introduction

The Lunar New Year, also called the Spring Festival, is the most important holiday for the Chinese. Traditionally, most Chinese families will put up New Year pictures in their house before New Year to express their wishes for peace and happiness.

On January 3, 1876, the Calendar New Year Picture, as a new term, first appeared in the Chinese commercial newspaper "*Shun Pao*". In addition to characters, landscapes, advertising products and business brands, the traditional Chinese calendar and Gregorian calendar were usually printed in the pictures, and this kind of picture was often posted for a whole year, it was also called "Calendar Poster".

In the 1920s, Calendar Poster started to become more accepted by Chinese people. Afterward, only beauties and trademarks were kept in it, and calendars were no longer printed in it, but people were still used to calling it Calendar Poster. In the following decades, Calendar Poster had been popular all over China and its influence was extremely wide.

2. Popular Elements in Calendar Poster

What kinds of pictures could be accepted by the public and become popular? It couldn't be determined by one single element. The social background, cultural concepts and lifestyles all have an important impact on it. In this article, the author chooses subject content, region background and drawing technique in the Calendar Posters, and tries to analyze its role and influence in the evolution of Calendar Poster.

2.1. Subject Contents

The early contents of the Calendar Poster were based on Chinese Traditional Folk Pictures, such as the Wufu (Meaning the five blessings, is a concept that signifies a grouping of certain good fortunes and luck in Chinese culture) and The Eight Immortals (They are signs of prosperity and longevity in China). But these traditional contents could not be well integrated with modern commercial advertisements, and they were not accepted by advertisers.

The other contents were Western themes, they were mostly Christian paintings, Western beauties, and Western famous paintings. Such as "*the Madonna*", "*The Last Supper*" (Leonardo Da Vinci), "*The Gleaners*" (Jean-Francois Millet) and other works. But this relatively unfamiliar content and drawing style were not liked by Chinese people at that time.

To match the Chinese market, the businessmen began to adopt traditional Chinese Paintings as the contents. In the beginning, they printed the original Chinese painting directly on the Calendar Posters without any changes. Later, the commercial competition was getting fiercer; the basic requirement was put forward to which the drawing of Calendar Poster must be closely related to the product. Thus, advertisers started to customize the drawings of Calendar Poster from professional illustrators.

Zhou Muqiao (?-1923) was chosen as the first commercial illustrator to draw the Calendar Poster. He had a strong realism drawing ability. Additionally, being able to “draw what customers want” was the main reason why he was selected. And this kind of realism drawing ability was not possessed by most Chinese illustrators at that time. “*A Beauty Writes Wumeiyin with a Sad Mood in Xiaoxiang Pavilion*” was his earliest surviving Calendar Poster work in the 1920s. From this, we can see that in the early days of Calendar Poster; the image of beauty was among the subject contents of Calendar Poster. As an important element of popular culture, young beauty could not only attract the attention of the public, but also bring enough hints. As people became more and more open, the images of nude beauty began to be widely illustrated in Calendar Posters. At that time, there were many Chinese businessmen in Southeast Asia, India, South America, and other places, when they chose the pictures of Calendar Poster, almost all of them liked to choose images of oriental nude beauty.

In 1915, Zheng Mantuo (1885-1957), a Chinese commercial illustrator, illustrated “*The Concubine Going Out of Bath*” for Huang Chujiu, a large medicine merchant in Shanghai. In this Calendar Poster, the concubine was wrapped in translucent flesh-red thin silk, appeared in a seducing and provocative posture in the picture. This was the earliest nude image used in the Calendar Poster. Since then, many professional commercial illustrators, such as Xie Zhiguang (1899-1976) and Jin Meisheng (1902-1989) began to illustrate the images of nude beauty into Calendar Poster, and the erotic culture also began to become a popular culture in Shanghai.

The subject contents of Calendar Poster ranged from Chinese folk paintings to Western famous paintings, and then from fashion schoolgirls to nude beauties. Calendar Posters maintained its vitality by those innovative contents. Pin-up girls in the Calendar Posters had become a vane guiding people's lives; their clothing was revealing, fashionable and eye-catching, which most traditional Chinese women couldn't achieve in their real life. These fashion contents were attracting countless Chinese people, when their eyes were satisfied, their vanity mentalities of advocating freedom avant-garde and fashion were met. For male readers, nude girls were also an important medium for satisfying their sexual fantasies.

2.2. Region Background

Since Shanghai opened as a port in November 1843, it has developed into the largest trading port in China. Unprecedented changes had taken place in all aspects of life in Shanghai's civil society, including food, clothing, housing, transportation, entertainment and customs. Learning Western culture and chasing Western fashion had gradually become the life goals of the wealthy class in Shanghai. This was also the main reason why the first Calendar Poster appeared in Shanghai.

In 1915, McTyeire School (a private girl school) was founded in Shanghai. The schoolgirls were full of vigor and youth, and the school uniforms on them were even more fashionable. Their trendy images were immediately captured by the painters keenly, and they were portrayed as the Pin-up models in the Calendar Posters. Subsequently, the images of Social Girls also entered Calendar Posters. For example, in the picture of “*The Shuangmei Brand Cosmetics of Co., Ltd.*”, The twin sisters permed their hair and wore short-sleeved cheongsam, they looked slender, elegant and charming. These vividly showed the characteristics of fashionable life in Shanghai in the 1930s.

Pursuing Western fashion was the lifestyle of many Chinese people in Shanghai at that time. To attract these people with Western people or things, some Calendar Posters often copied European and American pictorials. These illustrators no longer portrayed the lives of Chinese people, but replaced the face of Western beauty in the pictures with the face of Eastern beauty. Such as *"The Girl in Cheongsam Playing Golf"* and *"The Girl Riding a Motorcycle"*, which were illustrated by the Studio of Zhiying (a studio for professional drawing Calendar Poster in Shanghai).



Figure 1. The Girl in Cheongsam Playing Golf (Hang Zhiyin, 1920s)

2.3. Drawing Techniques

Zheng Mantuo was the first person to reform the drawing techniques of the Calendar Poster. He studied traditional Chinese painting when he was young. In the early 1920s, a painting workshop was founded by him in "the Erwo Xuan Photo Studio" in Hangzhou, and he drew realistic portraits based on the photos were provided by clients in the workshop.

The main characteristic of traditional Chinese painting is that outlines the object with lines first, then flat the color of the object itself in the wireframe; this is the obvious difference between traditional Chinese painting and Western painting. While Zheng Mantuo moved to Shanghai in 1914, the Shanghai painters still drew the Calendar Posters according to the technique of traditional Chinese painting. Based on his previous work experience in a photo studio, Zheng Mantuo began to reform the painting techniques of Calendar Poster. First, he used graphite powders to draw the character's sketch base and then used watercolor to cover it. The black graphite powders could help images to have a strong three-dimensional effect, and the watercolors could help images to have a transparent, brisk and moist effect. This drawing technique of mixing two kinds of painting materials that not only made the picture soft and realistic, but also made the skin of the characters white, round and delicate. This drawing technique achieved excellent results which were used to express urban women, and it was named "Brush Powder Watercolor Painting" by the professionals.

According to the statistics from the China Advertising Museum, Zheng Mantuo had drawn more than 100 works of Calendar Posters from 1914 to 1920, and the print circulation of his works had exceeded one million copies. Since then, the technique of "Brush Powder Watercolor

Painting” began to be studied and accepted by more professional Illustrators, and was popular in China for over half a century.

Hang Zhiying (1900-1947), the most outstanding illustrator in the history of Calendar Poster, inherited and developed the technique of “Brush Powder Watercolor Painting”. He was born into a scholarly family. In 1912, young Hang Zhiying was recruited as an apprentice by the painting department of the Commercial Press in Shanghai. After a long period of hard training, his drawing skills improved a lot. He was already famous when he was 18 years old, then he set up his studio to illustrate Calendar Posters.



Figure 2. The Shuangmei Brand Cosmetics of Co., Ltd. (Hang Zhiyin, 1920s)

Hang Zhiying's son, Hang Mingshi recalled what happened in the past. In order to learn how to draw Calendar Poster well, Hang Zhiying had been to Zheng Mantuo's home many times to ask him for advice, but Zheng Mantuo had always kept the technique of “Brush Powder Watercolor Painting” secret. By an occasional opportunity, Hang Zhiying found the graphite powder stored in Zheng Mantuo's studio and then uncovered this secret. In the process of painting with graphite powder, he found a serious disadvantage of this technique that the blackness was too heavy and the colors were not bright enough. To increase the saturation of the color, he used the best painting materials, American colors and Norwegian papers in his works. Through a lot of drawing practice, his technique became better and better, and graphite powder was used less and less. Graphite powder was only used to draw the boundary line of light and dark, other dark areas were drawn with darker cool colors. This method made the picture very bright, and this drawing technique was further improved.

In the drawing style of Calendar Poster, Hang Zhiying carefully observed the hairstyles, postures, and clothes of fashionable beauty in Shanghai, and derived nourishment from movies and Western pictorials. At last, a new oriental beauty image was born under his brush. This new oriental beauty was fashionable and gorgeous, slender and plump, with a touch of Western flavor, full of the charm of women. It had also become an important record of Chinese people's aesthetics at the time.

In the 1930s, Hang Zhiying founded the Studio of Zhiying and set up the business model of division and cooperation in his studio. Since its establishment, his Studio had quickly grabbed

70% market share of Calendar Poster after six months. According to the statistics of the China Advertising Museum, the Studio of Zhiying created more than 80 Calendar Poster works each year in its heyday. During the same period, there were about 100 professional illustrators in Shanghai, and their total number of works was less than that of the Studio of Zhiying. Exquisite technology, fashionable painting style and perfect business model allowed the Studio of Zhiying to occupy a dominant position in the Calendar Poster market for more than 20 years.

3. Conclusion

All in all, the creative intentions of commercial painting and pure art painting are opposite. Pure art paintings show the subjective emotions of the painters themselves. They only need to show their feelings in the works and don't need to care about the audience at all. But the creative intentions of commercial paintings are controlled by the masses. Whatever the masses want, commercial painters will create it. The public's aesthetic taste determines the artist's creative direction.

"Form ever follows function" is a basic commercial painting standard. As a commercial painting, its subject content and painting technique are different forms, and they must follow the function of product sales. If you want to attract customers to sell products, you must meet customer emotional needs.

In China at the beginning of the 20th century, enjoying the modern and fashionable Western lifestyle was the greatest emotional need of Chinese people. To achieve this goal, the illustrators reformed and innovated the content themes and drawing techniques of the Calendar Poster, they used pictures to build a dream in the Garden of Eden for everyone. These pictures not only aroused the public's erotic and material desires but also aroused their yearning for the modern Western world. To this day, these secular and popular elements are still influencing the development of Chinese art and the daily life of Chinese people in many ways.

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