

# Analysis of *Viewing Paintings* from the Perspective of Iconography

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**Abstract:** Distinguished from purely formalistic research methods, iconography pursues the interpretation of the hidden historical and humanistic connotations behind artworks, and is a discipline that combines visual text and content analysis methods. Combining the three stages of iconography proposed by Panofsky, the paper studies Shizeng Chen's *Viewing Paintings* from the perspective of iconography, summarizing the formation and change of the images and contents of the artworks in the cultural system and civilization at that time, as well as their implied ideology, and analyzing the hidden spirit of the times and the historical significance behind them, so as to expound their iconographic significance. Through an in-depth discussion at three levels: pre-pictorial iconographic description, iconographic analysis, and iconographic interpretation, the facts and surface contents reproduced in the images, the traditional level of literary, artistic, and cultural knowledge, as well as the interpretation of the potential meanings are revealed.

**Keywords:** Iconography; *Viewing Paintings*; Spirit of the times; Conceptual change

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## 1. Introduction

Chinese figure painting has a long history. Early figure paintings were generalized and brief, and their narrative character was already roughly seen in the surviving murals and artifacts. With the development of the times, the narrative character of figure painting has developed an extremely rich visual language under the pens of artists through the ages, and people, as the main body of the narrative in figure paintings, have always been present in the narrative baseline, playing an interpretive role. *Viewing Paintings* not only reflects the social landscape and the life scene of the art world during the Republic of China but also embodies the artist's keen capture and profound reflection on the changes of the times. This work is not only a record of a real historical event but also a vivid reproduction of the spirit and social atmosphere of that era, with important historical and artistic values.

## 2. The background of the era and the painter's biography

In the early years of the Republic of China, the unification of the country had not been completed and warlords

were constantly fighting; there were years of disasters, political unrest, and official corruption, and the people did not have enough to live on. China in the early 20th century, in the May Fourth Movement, the strong tradition of the anti-traditional closed art world began to transition to modernity, China faced a variety of changes during the turbulent period, the political situation was complex and volatile, the East and the West culture collision was intense.

Shizeng Chen (1876–1923), also known as Hengke, Huaitang, and Xiudaoren, was a native of Yining, Jiangxi <sup>[1]</sup>. Because of his father's relationship, Shizeng Chen studied painting and calligraphy from a number of famous masters from an early age and was extremely gifted. He studied in Japan and studied museum studies. After returning to Japan, he engaged in art education. Shizeng Chen's talent for painting was quite comprehensive, although he specialized in landscapes and flowers, he sometimes also painted figures, and the scope of his paintings was quite broad, and his techniques were also quite pure <sup>[2]</sup>. Although Shizeng Chen did not specialize in figure painting, he excelled in a variety of subjects and painting methods. Another of his specialties was the use of sketches and caricatures to depict the customary characters seen in Beijing, which had a deep social significance in customary paintings.

### 3. The iconographic significance of *Viewing Paintings*

The iconography represented by Panofsky is based on the study and understanding of iconography, and then the rational interpretation of the image ontology. He proposed that to analyze a work of art with iconography, it is necessary not only to study the shape and light of the picture itself but also to understand the background of the work. It is only when the connection between the painting and its history and culture is clarified that the deeper meaning of the image can be better understood. In the book, *The Meaning of Visual Art* <sup>[3]</sup>, iconography is explained in a more systematic way. The book divides the research of iconography into three levels: the first stage is the stage of pre-interpretation of iconography, which mainly explains the most natural meaning of the image; the second stage is the stage of iconography analysis, which mainly explains the traditional meaning of the image and connects the thematic meaning of the work with the specific culture of the region where it is located; and the third stage is the stage of iconography interpretation, which explains the influence of the artist's era, culture, economy, politics, and other factors to illustrate the deeper meaning, essence, and connotation of the work.

#### 3.1. Natural meaning

The first level of analysis in iconographic research is what is often called “what you see is what you get,” which leaves out the inner meaning of the work and starts only from the work itself, precisely listing and describing everything we see in the artwork without explaining the interconnections between these things. *Viewing Paintings* was painted in 1917, color on paper, 87.7 × 46.6 cm, and is now in the National Palace Museum (**Figure 1**). The inscription on the picture reads, “On December 1, 1917, Ye Yufu, Jin Gongbo, and Chen Zhongshu collected all the collectors in Beijing and exhibited them in Central Park for seven days, changing them every day and displaying a total of six to seven hundred kinds of paintings, and they took the money from the visitors for the relief of the flooding in Beijing, so they drew a picture of their scenery at that time to remember the event.” After the inscription, there is a small vermilion seal marked “Shizeng.” It is clear from the inscription that this exhibition, which gathered masterpieces from collectors in Beijing, was organized for the purpose of providing relief for the floods that occurred in 1917. Shizeng Chen wrote and deleted “Viewing Paintings” in the inscription, but named the work *Viewing Paintings*.



**Figure 1.** Shizeng Chen, *Viewing Paintings*, 1917, color on paper, 87.7 × 44.6 cm (Collection of the Palace Museum, Beijing)

The faces of the figures in the painting are simple and casual, with a somewhat caricatured look. Although there are many characters in the picture, they are not messy as they are arranged in a zigzag manner. The spatial treatment of *Viewing Paintings* is different from that of traditional figure paintings, in which the background is usually a white void or a distant view of clear springs and mountains, while the background of *Viewing Paintings* is fuller and has less white space. In terms of characterization, the author omits the lines and directly shapes the characters with large pieces of ink, with short and fine lines only outlining the local areas, and uses a technique close to “flying white” to express the bright part of the object on the lighted side, reflecting his feeling and expression of light when creating the environment. The omission of lines and the feeling and expression of light are largely different from traditional Chinese painting techniques, which shows Shizeng Chen’s attainments in Western painting. *Viewing Paintings*, with its traditional propositions, fresh content, and East-meets-West interpretation, reflects Shizeng Chen’s creative painting practice and exploration.

### 3.2. Traditional meanings

The second level of interpretation is “subject” or “theme,” i.e. what we see and the connections that arise between them. These subjects make up the world of images, stories and allegories, specific themes, and concepts<sup>[4]</sup>. The study of iconography suggests that any given image is a work of art<sup>[4]</sup>; no painting is accidental or random but is closely related to the specific cultural and historical context of the time. For example, in traditional Chinese painting, figure painting should not only take into account the status of the figure but also conform to the cultural and aesthetic interests of the time.

The self-titled *Dingsi* is from the sixth year of the Republic of China (1917), and the creation of this picture is based on real historical events. The sixth year of the Republic of China was an unforgettable year of catastrophe in history. Especially in the areas of Gyeonggi and Zhili, the drought was severe in the spring and summer, and then in late July and after the fall, there were several rainstorms. At one time, the railroad was washed away, farmland was flooded, seedlings were destroyed, and the affected area was extensive, with a number of people affected not seen in decades. After the flood, the Beiyang government, charitable organizations, and cultural figures have raised relief. A group of Beijing's cultural and artistic celebrities organized an exhibition in Central Park, now Zhongshan Park, to raise funds for the relief effort. The exhibition brought together six or seven hundred pieces of artwork, a sizable scale. The three men mentioned in the self-title were all leading figures in the literary and artistic circles in Beijing at the time. Shizeng Chen's *Viewing Paintings* depicts the scene of the art world at that time in the form of an exhibition to raise funds for disaster relief. The artist was present at the exhibition and recorded the scene from the first visual point of view, which is real and vivid, with a realism close to that of a news photo. On the screen, people from all walks of life are gathered in a warm atmosphere, including young and old Chinese in long robes and waistcoats, Westerners in Western-style suits, blondes and blue-eyed, and fashionable women in Western-style dresses, and the crowds are arranged in a staggered manner, forming a certain spatial hierarchy.

From this, it can be seen that the creation of *Viewing Paintings* comes from a real historical event. Interpretation of this work also gives us some insights into the life of Beijing's cultural people at that time. First of all, the image coexists with the perspectives of the creator and the viewer. The creator, Shizeng Chen, was recording the scenes of the exhibition as he saw them. As viewers of the exhibition, some of them were gazing at the scrolls and albums in front of them, while others were looking up at the scrolls hanging on the wall, either squarely or sideways, with different attitudes, none of which were similar to each other. Secondly, the fashion in the painting shows people from all walks of life. There are about 20 people on the screen, mainly older people, both Chinese and foreigners. The audience's clothing varied: some wore robes and horse coats with melon hats, while others wore suits with bowler hats. Additionally, fashionable women were seen wearing high-heeled shoes and gloves. They were all gathered in a lively atmosphere and seemed to be attracted to the collector's works on display, which they seemed to be discussing in addition to viewing the exhibition. Furthermore, the painting presents a different form of art exhibition from that of the literati.

### **3.3. Connotative meaning**

The third level of the iconographic perspective is the deeper meaning or connotation, or symbolic significance, that the creator is trying to convey in the image. The social context to be represented within the text of the image is interpreted. There are many reasons that have an impact on the painter's creation, such as economy, culture, politics, and the surrounding environment, etc. These reasons will be more or less expressed in the painter's creation, which contains the essential connotation of the work.

#### **3.3.1. Painting shifted from a private space of literati elegance to a mass public space**

Before the Republic of China, the exchange of calligraphy and painting in ancient China was very limited. Due to the limitations of class and transportation, the exchange of calligraphy and painting was only carried out in a small area. Therefore, although the literati's gathering was very common in ancient times, it could not produce a nationwide impact, but could only be confined to a certain region, which led to the formation of regional painting styles<sup>[5]</sup>. After the establishment of the Republic of China, the monopoly of the traditional literati class

on the art of painting and calligraphy was broken, and the art of painting and calligraphy in China ushered in a new wave of change, as literature and art were gradually asked to come out of the tower of ivory to the masses. This change involved many aspects of artistic creation, from the status of the artist and creative concepts to art forms, content, and subject matter, all of which underwent a profound transformation. During this period, regardless of origin, as long as one has excellent artistic attainments and cultural cultivation, one can show off on the art stage, each leading the way. The boundaries between the scholars and the artists were blurring, and the art of painting and calligraphy increasingly became the link between different classes and the spirit of the nation. The renewal of painting and calligraphy in the Republic of China injected new vitality into Chinese art and created a brand new situation for modern Chinese painting and calligraphy.

The historical material of *Viewing Paintings* reflects the significant change in the way of communication of Chinese painting and calligraphy during the Republican period. Prior to this period, the exchange of calligraphy and painting art appreciation was mostly limited to small-scale private activities among the literati, the so-called “literati’s elegant gathering.” The participants were mostly individuals of prominent social status and high cultural literacy, belonging to the scholarly class. They not only appreciated elegant art but also took the opportunity to sing together and exchange songs, showcasing their knowledge and taste. Although this way of communication was elegant, it had obvious class limitations and closedness. The public exhibition documented in *Viewing Paintings*, however, records a public exhibition held in Beijing’s Central Park that allowed the public, especially art lovers, to participate, transforming the exchange of Chinese painting and calligraphy from a relatively private and classy “literati gathering” to an open and egalitarian new form of “art exhibition.” It represents the birth of a new way of art exchange. The exhibition was held in such a public place as Beijing Central Park, open to all people and art lovers, breaking the class barriers of painting and calligraphy art appreciation. Both dignitaries and ordinary people, both Chinese and foreigners, have the opportunity to enjoy the masterpieces of calligraphy and painting in the same space. This practice undoubtedly greatly broadens the dissemination channels of painting and calligraphy, allowing art to truly enter the homes of ordinary people, and guiding more people into the art hall.

The viewers of *Viewing Paintings*, regardless of Chinese and foreign, male and female, fashionable and traditional, intellectuals and ordinary people, are equal in the public space, and the characters are not given identity labels. The fact that the public space is crowded with people reflects the wide participation of the masses and provides a realistic portrayal of society at that time. This breaks through the limitations of late Qing figure paintings, which were mostly based on subjects of high-ranking officials, Buddhist, and Taoist figures. The environmental public space shown in the picture is the practice and embodiment of the concept of “democracy” advocated by the Republic of China at the social level. The expression of public space in *Viewing Paintings* implies that the political ecology of the Republic of China has changed since the late Qing Dynasty, the public’s enthusiasm to participate in public welfare has gradually increased, and the painter’s vision has broadened. Art exhibitions such as the one depicted in the picture were introduced along with the modern trend of Western learning, and this form began to become common after the May Fourth Movement in 1919. Therefore, when Shizeng Chen created this painting, art exhibitions were still a relatively new thing. For artists, participation in such relief and public service exhibitions also reflects their social concern and sense of responsibility to a certain extent. Through socialized depiction in the public sphere, the traditional attributes of Chinese painting were objectively changed, completing a modern transformation from private entertainment to mass expression.



### 3.3.2. Changes in the meaning of *Viewing Paintings* in ancient and modern times

The theme of viewing paintings has existed since ancient times and is not original to Shizeng Chen. In ancient times, viewing paintings was mostly associated with the spiritual trust of elegant pleasure and the provision of smoke and clouds, and thus the act of viewing paintings evolved into an idealized symbol. Shizeng Chen's *Viewing Paintings*, on the other hand, is a far cry from the traditional meaning of "viewing paintings."

Shizeng Chen deleted "Viewing Paintings" in the inscription, but then forcibly named the work *Viewing Paintings*, which should have been written unconsciously in response to the situation, and is a natural outpouring of traditional painting ideas rooted deep in his heart. However, Shizeng Chen deliberately deleted it, indicating that he wanted to emphasize the factual function of the painting, expressing the real scene at that time. Naming the painting after "viewing" is precisely his delicate grasp of self-identity and role positioning between East and West. Shizeng Chen lived in the late Qing Dynasty and the early Civil War, a turbulent period when China was facing various changes, with a complex and volatile political situation and an intense collision between Eastern and Western cultures. In response to the situation of Chinese painting being stereotyped by the culture of copying the ancients, Shizeng Chen, although also advocating the innovation of Chinese painting, did not think that "Western painting is scientific and Chinese painting is unscientific," but emphasized the need to focus on the core elements of the country's paintings, address its shortcomings, and learn from and integrate the strengths of Western techniques. In the creation of *Viewing Paintings*, the concept of Western photography was incorporated, as well as the popular pictorial mode of the newspaper at that time<sup>[6]</sup>. The drawing style has diverged from traditional Chinese painting, which emphasizes brushwork and ink techniques. It now incorporates elements like rapid brushstrokes akin to Western shorthand styles, watercolor-like light ink washes and flat painting, and exaggerated outlines reminiscent of cartoon imagery. Though he emphasized factualism, Shizeng Chen did not depict the scene with the fully realistic brushstrokes of Western painting but rather combined traditional Chinese realistic brushwork with Western cartoon-like tones. Subconsciously, he hoped to integrate the concepts of traditional Chinese painting with those of Western painting, so that his works would be rooted in traditional Chinese literati painting and gain a "legitimate" identity and status in the traditional painting genealogy.

## 4. Conclusion

As far as painting is concerned, Shizeng Chen's artistic achievement is not only reflected in his skills in ink and brushwork but also in his artistic creativity and humanistic concern that transcends the picture itself. The public-oriented exhibition method reflected in *Viewing Paintings* is the concrete practice of the "popularization of art" trend. It opens up a new channel of art communication and brings art closer to the public. The public can not only appreciate the art of painting and calligraphy on the spot but also communicate with the artists face to face and listen to the experience of art creation, which greatly stimulates the public's passion for learning and loving art. In a sense, it is this kind of open communication that injects new vitality into the art of Chinese painting and calligraphy and promotes art creation from "privatization" to "socialization." *Viewing Paintings* epitomizes the profound changes that took place in the art of Chinese painting and calligraphy during the Republican period. It signaled the advent of a brand new era—art was no longer the exclusive domain of the literati and the elegant but began to face the broadest possible public, and art creation and exchange began to show unprecedented openness and inclusiveness. This change opened up a broad path for the development of modern Chinese art and promoted the transformation and innovation of Chinese painting and calligraphy.

## Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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