

# During the Same Period, the Development of Female Artists in China was Compared with that of Female Artists in Europe

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**Abstract:** This study focuses on female artists of the Tang Dynasty and female artists of the same period in Europe. It conducted research on the works of these female artists, made comparative analyses of representative female artists one by one, explored the value of their works during that period, analyzed the commonalities of female artists from different cultural backgrounds, and investigated the differences among them. Selecting representative female artists, the study compared their styles, achievements, and influences from multiple dimensions. The research found that social mobility, cultural inclusiveness, and the art evaluation system are important factors influencing the artistic development of female artists. This study can enrich the comparative research content on the history of female art from a cross-cultural perspective and provide references for the development of contemporary female art.

**Keywords:** Female; Artist; Europe; Art history

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## 1. Introduction

The study of female art history is an important part of the entire history of human art<sup>[1]</sup>. However, due to the long-term influence of many factors such as social structure and cultural atmosphere, the study of women's art history has long been faced with the problem of regional separation and an isolated background. Moreover, most existing studies are based on a single cultural perspective and focus on the individual research of female artists, which makes it difficult to separate the specific social background from the research results, thus making it difficult to form a systematic study with broader significance on the development of female art. The 8th to 10th centuries were an important turning point in the development of human civilization. The Tang Dynasty entered the peak period of feudal society, while Europe was in the early stage of the Middle Ages. These two regions had significant differences in political structure, cultural ecology, and gender concepts. However, both regions have witnessed the emergence of a group of female creators who push the boundaries

of gender. This study starts from the perspective of cross-cultural comparison to explore the universal laws of female art development and the special paths of female art development in different cultural backgrounds. By comparing the living environment, creative practices, and historical impacts of female artists in China and Europe, this study analyzes the two-way interaction relationship between cultural background and female art subjects. The research is divided into three parts: background introduction, case comparison, and revelation reflection, which provides certain reference and historical experience for the development of contemporary female art.

## **2. Comparative analysis of representative female artists**

### **2.1. Xue Tao (Tang Dynasty) vs. Hrosvitta (Europe)**

Xue Tao was one of the most representative female artists of the Tang Dynasty. Born into an official family, she later entered the music service and became a famous female poet, calligrapher, and paper-making expert in Sichuan. Her representative works include over 500 poems collected in “Jinjiang Collection” and the “Xue Tao Paper” she improved and produced. In terms of artistic style, Xue Tao’s poems are clear and natural, with sincere emotions. They not only express personal experiences but also reflect observations of social reality, breaking the limitations of traditional female creative themes. Her calligraphy was influenced by Wang Xizhi, with a forceful and vigorous style that combined hardness and softness. It was praised by the Northern Song Dynasty’s “Xuanhe Calligraphy Spectrum” as “without the feminine air.” In terms of creative achievements, Xue Tao was one of the few female creators in Chinese history who had personal works collections that survived to this day. Her improved “Xue Tao Paper” became a classic carrier for later literati’s letters, promoting the aesthetic development of paper-making techniques. In terms of historical influence, Xue Tao broke the traditional prejudice that “women without talent are virtuous,” becoming a spiritual symbol for later female creators. Her works were collected and evaluated by successive literati and were an indispensable part of the Tang Dynasty literature history.

Hroswitha was a nun at the Gandersheim Monastery in Germany in the 10th century. She was the earliest female playwright and poet in medieval Europe. Her representative works include six comedies, and a large number of poems. Among them, “Darsitius” is the most famous female drama work in the Middle Ages. In terms of artistic style, Hroswitha’s works were based on classical Roman comedy, and all the content revolved around religious themes. Through the form of drama, she spread Christian doctrines, with concise and vivid language, possessing a strong educational function. At the same time, it also affirmed the wisdom of women. In terms of creative achievements, she was the first female playwright in Western history with a complete collection of works that survived. This filled the gap in female drama creation in the Middle Ages, and her works broke the monopoly of male drama creators. In terms of historical influence, Hroswitha’s creation proved the creative ability of women in the field of religious art. Her works were widely copied by the monastery system and became important texts in medieval religious education, laying the foundation for later female religious creations <sup>[2]</sup>.

Both of them have achieved remarkable results in the male-dominated field of artistic creation, to some extent breaking through the limitations of gender and conducting their creations based on their specific identities. Their works have a cross-generational influence and have been widely disseminated. However, Xue Tao’s works have a strong personal expression. The themes of her works include personal emotions and social observations <sup>[3]</sup>. Hérozvetta’s creations are entirely dedicated to religion. When later scholars evaluate the works of the two, they tend to evaluate Xue Tao’s works more from the perspective of literary aesthetics,

while evaluating Hérozvetta's works more from the perspective of religious edification.

## **2.2. Li Zhen and Hildegard von Bingen**

Li Zhen was a representative figure of female monk painters in the Tang Dynasty. She came from a noble family and later became a nun. She was one of the earliest female religious painters with clear records in Chinese history. Her representative works include "The Heavenly Official Picture", "The Eighth-Seventh Immortal Scroll" (said to be Li Zhen's draft), and a large number of Taoist mural manuscripts. Li Zhen's Taoist figure paintings have smooth lines, elegant colors, and elegant and dynamic character designs. They inherit the realistic tradition of Tang Dynasty figure paintings while integrating the ethereal temperament of Taoist aesthetics, breaking the stereotypical style of male religious painters. Her works enriched the expression dimension of Taoist art and were among the few female painters recorded in "The History of Famous Paintings of Past Dynasties." Hildegard von Bingen was a famous nun, religious artist, and theologian in 10th-century Germany, and one of the most influential female creators in medieval Europe. Her representative works include the religious music collection "Harmonious Symphony", the theological work "The Path to Knowing God", and a large number of religious illustration manuscripts. These works have a strong mysticism. The musical works have spiritual and ethereal melodies, and the illustration works have bright colors and extensively use symbolic symbols to express religious experiences. She claimed that all her creations originated from "the divine revelation" and had distinct personal characteristics <sup>[4]</sup>.

Both of them create their works based on their own religious beliefs. Their works possess strong spiritual expression characteristics, integrating personal understanding while also interpreting religious doctrines. However, there are differences between them: the religious backgrounds they rely on for creation are not the same. Li Zhen's creative works reflect the mutual influence between Taoist art and secular art, while Hildegard's works were created within a single Christian monolithic cultural environment.

## **2.3. Female successors in Zhou Fang's female model painting system and the representative group of medieval European female copyists**

The female successors in Zhou Fang's female model painting system are representatives of female artists in the Tang Dynasty's folk art. They mainly include Zhou Fang's female disciples and female painters from the court and the common people. The most representative one is Zhou, who was the wife of Li Chu. She inherited Zhou Fang's style of "simple clothing and soft colors" in female model painting. Their representative works include a large number of unsigned Tang Dynasty female model paintings, mural sketches, and embroidery patterns. The works of this female creative group focus more on the expression of the female perspective, and the depiction of female expressions and clothing details is more delicate. It weakens the "viewing" attribute from the perspective of male painters and is closer to the real-life state of Tang Dynasty women. The European medieval female copyist group is the representative of female artists in Europe in the 10th century. They mainly worked in the copying rooms of various monasteries. The most representative one is the female copyist group of St. Gall Abbey in Germany. Their representative works include a large number of illustrations for manuscripts, decorative patterns, and gospel manuscripts. The copying of parts of the Lindisfarne Gospel was completed by female copyists. The works of female copyists are more decorative, using a large number of plant patterns and geometric patterns to decorate the manuscripts, and the colors are softer and more delicate, forming a sharp contrast with the hard style of male copyists.

The similarities between these two lie in the fact that they both belong to the groups that inherit folk art. Their creative activities are mainly carried out in a group form, and most of their works have no specific identifiers. Moreover, the creations of these groups have expanded the application scope of mainstream art, promoted the popularization of art dissemination, and have a distinct female perspective, depicting details with extremely delicate brushstrokes. However, there are also obvious differences between them. In the Tang Dynasty, the skills of female artists were mostly passed down through folk master-apprentice relationships, having a certain secular nature. While the female scribes' groups in Europe still relied on the monastic system to master the skills, they had a strong religious attribute, and their works served the dissemination of religious culture.

### **3. Historical comparison and its implications for the development of contemporary female art**

#### **3.1. A diverse and inclusive creative environment is the fundamental soil for the development of women's art**

The prosperity of female art in the Tang Dynasty was mainly attributed to the multicultural inclusiveness of the society at that time. The coexistence of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism in the cultural landscape of the Tang Dynasty, the open foreign policy, and the relatively relaxed gender concepts provided a broad space for female creators. Whether it was educated women, performers in the market, or artisans from the folk, they could all obtain opportunities for artistic creation in different fields. Their creative themes covered various aspects such as secular emotions, natural aesthetics, and social observations, forming a rich and diverse artistic expression system. In contrast, the cultural structure of medieval Europe during the same period strictly restricted women's creative activities, confining them within specific frameworks. All creations had to serve the needs of mainstream cultural dissemination, leaving little room for secular expression, resulting in extremely limited themes and creative autonomy for European female art during that period. The direct inspiration from this historical experience for the development of contemporary female art lies in: a multicultural and inclusive cultural environment is a necessary prerequisite for the release of female artistic creativity.

The outstanding artistic achievements of female artists in the Tang Dynasty were closely related to the level of popularization of cultural resources. The official imperial workshops established by the Tang government, the aesthetic education system of local official schools, and the cultural inheritance mechanism within families provided channels for women from different social strata to receive artistic education. Xue Tao was able to make breakthroughs in multiple fields, such as poetry, calligraphy, and papermaking. This was not only due to the cultural inheritance of her family, but also benefited from the rich cultural atmosphere and relatively open public cultural space in the Ba-Shu region of the Tang Dynasty. At the same time, in the same period in Europe, educational resources for women were almost monopolized by specific institutions, and secular women had almost no opportunity to receive systematic art education. This directly led to a much smaller group size of female creators in medieval Europe and their extremely narrow creative fields.

#### **3.2. Establishing gender-sensitive artistic evaluation standards is the institutional guarantee for the realization of female artistic value**

For a long time, the value of the works created by female artists in the Tang Dynasty and those by female

artists in the Medieval period in Europe has been underestimated. This is essentially a natural consequence resulting from a single evaluation system dominated by men. The poetry, calligraphy, and paintings created by Tang Dynasty women were usually classified under the category of “women’s handicrafts”, and the evaluation criteria mainly focused on whether they conformed to the norms of female identity, rather than the artistic value of the works themselves. The “Xuanhe Calligraphy Spectrum” commented that Xue Tao’s calligraphy “lacked feminine characteristics”, essentially still using male aesthetic standards as the evaluation benchmark, without recognizing the independent aesthetic value of female creations. During the same period, the artistic works of European women were long regarded as adjuncts to mainstream cultural propaganda, and their artistic value was not rediscovered until the rise of women’s art history in the 20th century.

Historically, the contributions of female artists have been systematically suppressed, which is directly related to the gender bias in the knowledge production mechanism of art history. In the Tang Dynasty, there were fewer than 20 recorded female artists, and a large number of their creative works were attributed to male artists. During the Medieval period in Europe, the work of female scribes was long regarded as manual labor rather than artistic creation, and their names rarely appeared in the narrative of art history. This gender inequality in the knowledge production process led to the artificial fragmentation of the inheritance line of female art, making it difficult for contemporary female creators to obtain identity recognition and creative inspiration from history. In recent years, the global research craze on female art history is precisely a correction of this historical injustice. Improving the knowledge production mechanism of female art history not only restores the original appearance of history but also provides rich historical references for contemporary female creators, enhancing their cultural confidence and identity recognition.

### **3.3. The construction of subjectivity is the intrinsic driving force for female artists to break through structural limitations**

Whether it was the female artists of the Tang Dynasty such as Xue Tao, or the female scribes of the medieval European church like Helvetusta, the common feature of these female artists was that they were not completely restricted by the social structure of their time. Instead, they actively sought possibilities for creation within the limited space. Although Xue Tao was limited by her identity as a musician, she constructed an independent cultural identity through poetry creation and the improvement of Xue Tao. Helvetusta ingeniously incorporated affirmations of female wisdom into the specific creative framework , breaking through the inherent boundaries of traditional texts. Their creative practices proved that even in extremely unfavorable social environments, an individual’s subjective initiative could still open up new spaces for artistic creation. In the Tang Dynasty, the transmission of female art mainly relied on family ties and master-apprentice relationships. The female successors of the Zhou Fang portrait painting school achieved a unique artistic style through their intergenerational skill transmission. The female creators in European monasteries also formed a distinctive religious art creation tradition through teamwork. The existence of such female creative groups not only promoted the transmission of skills but also provided emotional support and identity recognition for female creators, helping them break through their personal limitations.

Contemporary female artists still face various explicit or implicit gender restrictions, but historical experience shows that structural limitations are not completely insurmountable. Contemporary female creators can fully utilize the existing social structure and, through their own creative practices, expand the expression boundaries of female art.

## 4. Conclusion

The creative processes and artistic values of female artists in the Tang Dynasty of China and those in medieval Europe during the same period indicate that the development and creation of female art are not merely issues of gender liberation, but rather complex products closely intertwined with social and cultural factors. Although female artists in both China and Europe faced similar gender restrictions, due to their different cultural backgrounds, they developed unique artistic creation paths with their own characteristics. The works of Tang Dynasty female artists were more secular, enabling them to express themselves in secular and individualized forms, while the female artists in Europe during the same period were heavily constrained by their religious identities, and their creative themes were relatively monotonous. To promote the development of contemporary female art, it is necessary to draw on historical experience, optimize the creative environment, improve the evaluation system of works, and establish a more inclusive and diverse artistic ecosystem. This historical comparison can also provide us with a more comprehensive perspective, allowing us to understand the relationship between gender and art in a deeper way.

## Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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