

Body Image and Sports Spirit: A Comparative Study of the Performance Characteristics of Chinese and Western Sports Painting

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Abstract

Body image and sportsmanship, as core elements of human sports culture, present distinct visual expressions and philosophical connotations in Chinese and Western painting. This study is aimed at how to shape body image and how to pass down sports spirit, taking the traditional sports paintings during the Tang and Song dynasties in China and classical works from Ancient Greece to the Renaissance in Western countries as the primary analytical objects, this paper concludes that Chinese sports painting tends to express the spirit of cultivating oneself and harmonious coexistence between humans and nature by means of delicate and introverted strokes and scenes integrated into nature, forming an intense sense of vigor and harmonious body image; Western sports painting with strict anatomy and strong black and white contrast,

Keywords

Body image; Sportsmanship; Sports painting; Comparison between China and the West; Artistic expression.

1. Introduction

Sports is a universal language of humanity that transcends all eras, and is a form of activity that expresses power, intelligence, and beauty through the human body. And freezing the brief existence of sports movements on paper or rice paper becomes a cultural symbol, reflecting different ethnic understandings of the body, sports, and even the whole world. Body image is not simply a representation of an image, but a product processed through certain ideological consciousness, social norms, and aesthetic orientations. Similarly, the spirit of sports is not purely a competitive spirit. In the East, it carries the moral color of cultivation and peace, while in the West, it is a legendary story of struggle and conquest[1].

2. Analysis of core concepts

Before conducting a specific comparative analysis, it is necessary to clarify the two fundamental concepts of body image and sportsmanship in this article.

Body image does not refer to an individual's psychological understanding and experience of their own body, but rather a body image constructed by certain cultural ideas, era characteristics, and aesthetic consciousness in art works. It is a comprehensive representation system that integrates shape, posture, strength, emotional atmosphere, and cultural connotation. The body image in sports paintings is the artist's perception and reconstruction of the moving human body image, which is the artistic presentation of flesh and blood shaped by cultural concepts. It is not only about how muscles rise and how lines flow, but also about what context this body is placed in and what meaning it is given[2].

The so-called sportsmanship refers to the values and attitudes towards life that people pursue, express, and praise through sports as a carrier. It is something at the technical level that is

higher than specific project rules, and it is the ideal goal for human beings to achieve in physical movement. In the West, sportsmanship is often understood as the Greek style competitive spirit: competing with each other and playing fairly; Dare to challenge and strive for victory; Pursuing honor and so on, with distinct personal heroism and tragedy colors[3].

In traditional China, the spirit of sports is often combined with health preservation, self-cultivation, entertainment, and even etiquette, emphasizing the harmony of body and mind, the integration with nature, the cultivation of virtue in activities, and the enjoyment and transcendence of spirit through games, reflecting an inner and adaptive wisdom of life.

3. Comparison of Performance Characteristics - Shaping Body Imagery

3.1. Physical Form and Sense of Strength

The Chinese painting is not trying to paint out the real anatomical structure of human bodies in terms of depicting the moving body, but more like using line to express the movement's posture and atmosphere of the dynamic object. "Line" is the heart that beats, and "line" is also the path that energy walks. For example: the murals and brocaded color paintings of the Tang and Song Dynasty about playing balls, fencing, etc.. Its characters are rather refined and easy-going. The painter adopts round and elastic line drawing to sketch the actions of the characters who are bending their bodies to play ball on horseback or waving a racket in the air on the ground[4]. A typical one is the Tang Dynasty Tomb Mural "Maqiu Tu" (Figure 1) of Prince Zhanghui's tomb. The riders on horseback, drew in dynamic, flowing strokes two dogs chasing a ball. Their poses are active but elegant, the dynamism of their figures coming from the sweep of the sleeves and the leaning torsos, not from an overt muscularity. The energy is suggested by motion and movement, not static anatomical bulk.



Figure 1: Tang Dynasty "Maqiu Tu" (Polo) — Detail

The sense of muscle mass is intentionally weakened, and the strength is not reflected in the bulging and protruding muscles, but is hidden in the overall posture formed by the arched and straight sleeve lines and twisted hips and folded arms. This is a subtle and introverted force, pursuing cleverness rather than brute force, and the overall strength of the body rather than the expansion of local limbs. Even in competitive performances such as sumo wrestling, the posture of the characters is still full of comedic humor and exaggeration, and this force is more like a fun life tension, not a killing style violence.

In contrast, the body power in Western painting is outwardly manifested, anatomical, and explosive. For example, in the athletics poster designed by Ernie Barnes for the 1984 Olympics

(Figure 2), every muscle on the body of a sprinter is depicted in an exaggerated way, like steel bars, full of tension. They twisted their faces, stretched and pulled to the extreme, their bodies squeezed against each other, competing in the running, full of explosive movement. Barnes' experience as a former professional athlete not only portrays the beauty of power in this artwork, but also carries a sense of pain and inner struggle in top-level competition. This sense of power is outward facing, full of confrontation and drama.

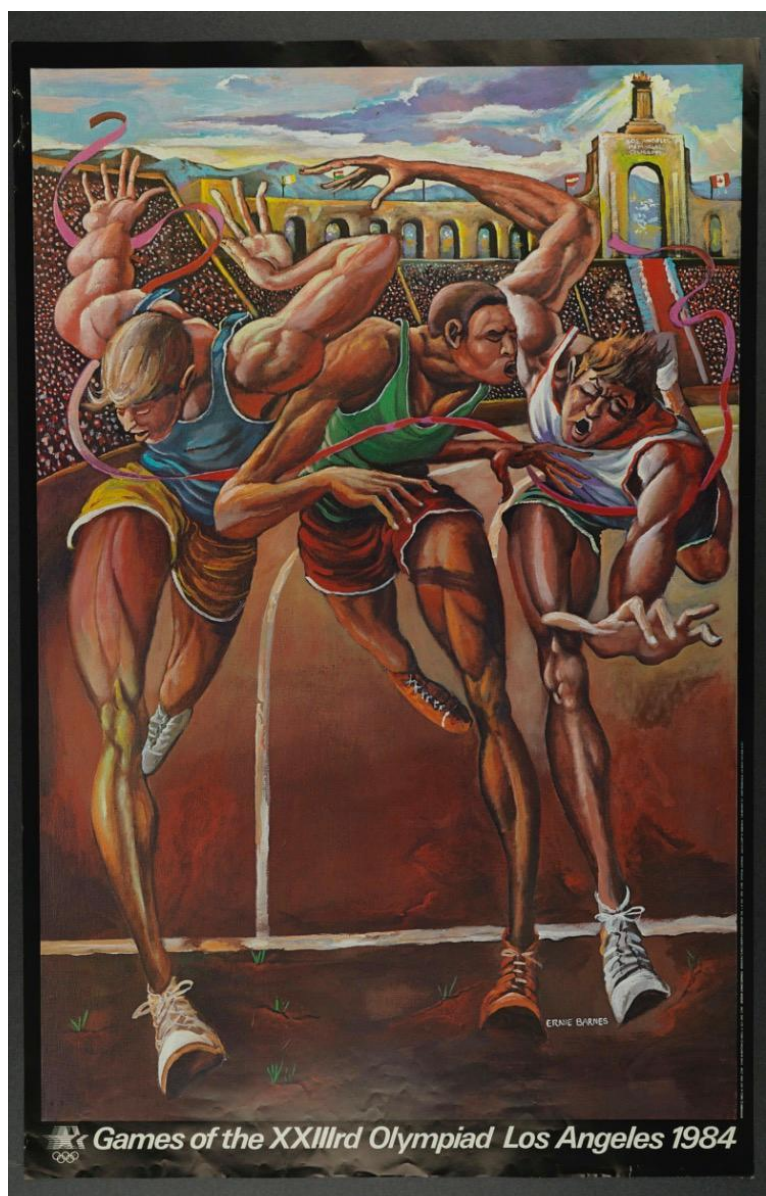


Figure 2: Ernie Barnes, 1984 Olympic Athletics Poster, 1984

Western painting, on the other hand, has been based on the scientific study of bodily anatomy and the pursuit of perfection since ancient Greece. Their pursuit of a body that is both credible and perfect is particularly evident in sports themes. Whether it's runners on ancient Greek pottery or combat warriors in Renaissance compositions, their bodies are composed of precise bones and muscles, and their sense of strength is directly materialized into plump and bulging muscles, bulging veins, and violently twisting postures.

Western painters are fond of capturing the peak moment of power explosion: the discus thrower twists their body and gathers momentum to reach the peak, while the wrestler presses their full body weight and strength onto their opponent. The development of the contrast method further enhances this sense of power, with strong light and shadow tracing across the

undulations of muscles, creating distinct block contrasts that give the body a sculptural sense of weight and a striking physical presence. The power here is an outward, confrontational, and conquering force[5].

3.2. Physical Space and Scene

The place where the body is located is also an important factor in forming body imagery. In Chinese painting, there are rarely individual athletes, always as part of an integral, generally natural or humanistic setting. Similar to a photograph of a woman seated on a swing, there is frequently a garden behind the swing: A painting of literati throwing pots, always accompanied by lake stones, banana leaves, and curved water flowing cups. People-scenery are not first-order and second order relationships, but are organically integrated in a deep and artistic whole. This scattered view composition method makes the eyes of viewers move back and forth on the screen, is like viewing the whole process performance [6]. For example, "Jiao Yin Ji Qiu Tu" (Figure 3) of the South Song Dynasty: children holding a ball in the foreground in front of large banana plant. The dense vegetation dominates the painting and frames the man in an idyllic, intimate garden setting. It presents the game as an activity in a pleasant and comfortable environment of nature and home life that does not focus on the game but rather on its context.



Figure 3: Southern Song Dynasty "Playing Ball under the Banana Tree"

Sports here are a part of the refined life, a way of communication between humans and nature, full of playfulness and lyricism. Even the more intense sport of polo is often depicted in open royal gardens, where people and galloping horses, fields and distant mountains together form a grand and orderly picture.

However, Western painting, especially since the Renaissance, often regards the moving body itself as the absolute visual center, and the background is often simplified, blurred, or even idealized as remnants of classical architecture, with the aim of highlighting the human body in the foreground and creating a solemn or dramatic atmosphere. The focal perspective method also tightly fixes the audience's gaze on the central event on the screen - usually a fierce struggle between two athletes, or when a heroic athlete makes a signature move. Space is staged and serves physical performance[7].

In Michelangelo's red chalk line Archers Shooting at a Herm (around 1530) (Figure 4), a group of naked shooters are the focal point of the entire painting, while the background is greatly weakened, almost blank or ground; All the lines, movements, and attention are on the idealized bodies of these open bowstrings, as well as on the objects they collectively point towards. Space here degenerates into a pure medium for expressing human power, movement, and formal beauty, highlighting the momentary and intrinsic nature of actions themselves, rather than the natural and social contexts in which they occur.



Figure4: Michelangelo, Archers Shooting at a Herm, circa 1530

3.3. Aesthetic ideals of the body

Chinese and Western painting have different aesthetic ideals for the movement of the body based on different philosophies and aesthetic traditions. Chinese painting is subject to Taoist natural philosophy and Confucian ethics, and is controlled by the literati class in terms of aesthetic discourse. Therefore, the ideal painted body image avoids excessive roughness, violence, and sensory stimulation; Seeking the appearance of the gods, valuing bones and abandoning flesh. Whether it's a palace maid who steps and plays basketball or a gentleman who practices shooting, their posture is light and even their movements are subtle and introverted[8].

Clear bones and plump appearance are both forms of beauty, but their commonality lies in emphasizing the spiritual temperament and cultural cultivation revealed by the body. The body of an athlete ultimately points towards a state of life that is polite, interesting, and in harmony with the spirit of heaven and earth.

Since ancient Greece, the West has regarded strong and perfect male nudity as the most beautiful realm of civic virtue and ideal humanity, and has continued to follow this tradition until the Renaissance when it was revered as a standard. Therefore, in Western sports paintings, it is often an idealized hero's body. It is symmetrical, perfect, full of power, and is an image full of vitality and spiritual tension. This is an outward, conquering, and confident beauty. It is a tribute to the robust beauty of the body itself, and a praise for the rationality, courage, and greatness embodied by this power beauty.

Even when the body expresses pain and struggle, such as in the Laocoon sculpture, it is solemnly and symbolically presented. It achieves the beauty of its movement in such a posture, achieving the humanization of divinity in movement, and reflecting human pursuit of transcendence[9].

4. Comparison of Core Spirit - Communication of Sports Spirit

4.1. Spiritual Value Orientation

The sports spirit contained in Chinese sports painting is the pursuit of harmony and inner transcendence. In China, sports are first and foremost a way to cultivate oneself. For example, Confucianism regards archery as one of the six arts, and the archery themes in paintings are often solemn and serious, emphasizing ritual, righteousness, and moral cultivation, rather than simply comparing skills and strength. For example, Taoism and its influence, such as the Guide Map and the Five Animal Play Map, link physical activity with breathing regulation and natural laws, pursuing the goal of dispelling diseases, prolonging life, and achieving harmony between heaven and man.

In many paintings depicting folk activities, such as kite flying, Loong Boat racing, dragon lantern dancing, sports are a way of entertainment for community gathering and celebrating festivals, full of lively folk flavor and optimistic life interest. In summary, the spirit of sports here is introverted, adaptable, and closely related to daily life and ethical practice. It ultimately leads to the harmony of individual body and mind, as well as the harmony with the group and nature.

Western sports paintings, on the other hand, are full of a spirit of confrontation and outward transcendence. It can directly find its roots in the ancient Greek Olympic Games. In those black and red painted pottery bottles, people strive hard to compete for the crown woven from olive branches, which is the highest honor. The victorious become heroes, and their images are cast into statues for worship. The pursuit of victory, honor, and immortal fame is full of competitive consciousness and individual heroism. Sports are a battlefield to prove one's own value and surpass the limits of ordinary people.

The Renaissance and subsequent painting inherited and expanded this spirit, combining the display of human strength and beauty with the affirmation of human dignity and infinite potential by humanists. The body in motion has become a spiritual symbol for humanity to challenge fate, resist constraints, and pursue freedom and perfection. This spirit is outgoing, expansive, full of dramatic tension and a sense of tragic nobility[10].

4.2. Character Relationships and Narrative

Different spiritual values will also have an impact on how to handle character relationships and how to select narrative styles in the picture. The relationship between the characters in the Chinese painting is usually a combination of athletes, leisurely, or festive, and typically features groups of people engaged in happy scenes. This can be seen from the Ming dynasty handscroll "Xuanzong Xing Le Tu" (Figure 5), which records Emperor Xuanzong playing various games such as archery, polo, and chui wan (golf). The compositions are orderly, ceremonious, and depict collective activities in an extensive imperial garden. The story is told on a long scroll, inviting the spectator to wander among various athletic events as part of an overall spectacle of languid imperial life and peaceful harmony.



Figure 5: Ming Dynasty's "Emperor Xuanzong's Pleasure Excursions"

In terms of plot narration, Chinese long scroll paintings are more suitable for depicting the process of an event. As the picture unfolds slowly, the audience can appreciate the different stages of the transition over time, gaining a linear and interesting feeling.

Direct confrontation between persons or groups, which Western painting especially likes to feature, and the center of the screen is fixed in the muscle wrestling between the two wrestlers or the tense physical contact of the runners just before crossing the line. The relationships between characters are tense, confrontational, where there are unambiguous winners and losers. In even a scene of group fight, the painters emphasize some pairs of core confrontational relations by using composition and light and shadow. As for narration, Western painting has learned how to choose the most pregnant moment, this is also what Lessing meant by referring to the moment implying the antecedent and consequence of the action. From the posture of the discus thrower turning to the vertex, viewers are able to imagine his past energy storage, and the imminent fast throw.

This narrative is condensed and explosive, aimed at maximizing the momentary emotional impact and ideological connotation.

5. Case comparison analysis

5.1. Archery Themes

In China, court paintings of the Qing Dynasty, such as the Qianlong Emperor's hunting scenes, are also classics that interpret the spirit of Chinese archery. In the painting, Emperor Qianlong is dressed in formal attire, riding a horse, sitting steadily, drawing bows and arrows, with a calm demeanor and graceful movements. Behind him is a carefully crafted royal garden with trees and rocks, making it an ideal hunting scene. The overall picture is solemn, magnificent, and orderly. The archery here is primarily to demonstrate the majesty of a king and the cultivation that conforms to ancient etiquette, and is a concrete expression of the Confucian concept of shooting to observe virtue. The focus of exercise is not on prey, but on completing a set of rituals of power and virtue.

The body image is restrained and elegant, while the spirit of movement is ceremonial and symbolic.

The archery depicted in Western painting has a completely different spiritual connotation. Michelangelo's "Archers Shooting at Heracles" (Figure 4), although not a competition scene, is a admiration for the competitive spirit of ancient Greece and Rome, as well as a tribute to the beauty of the human body. In the painting, all archers are naked, and their body proportions and muscles are in the most perfect state. Their posture is also full of a sense of power, as they pull their bows to gather strength. At this point, there is no clear natural context or social etiquette scene as a reference, but rather a focus on the body's own sense of power, beauty, and mental concentration during the movement process. Shooting becomes a simple expression of strength and beauty, calling for human strength and classical heroism.

On the contrary, in Greek bottle paintings or later Western paintings, such as the archery scenes of mythological heroes like Hercules or Apollo, the characters are all naked or semi naked, with tense muscles and strong movements. The bow is pulled open to form a full moon shape, and the gaze is fixed on the bullseye. The body is full of tension and aggression. The scene may be on the battlefield or in the wilderness, with an atmosphere full of tension and a sense of crisis. Archery here is a part of one's livelihood skills, combat style, or heroic achievements. Here, emphasis is placed on strength, accuracy, and the effect of hitting a single arrow. The body image is full of explosive power, and the spirit of sports is heroic and practical.

5.2. Wrestling Themes

Ancient Chinese sumo painting is mostly seen on folk paintings and caves. For example: Sumo Painting of Song Dynasty, two wrestlers who are as fat as leather balls, wearing shorts under the hip and hugging and wrestling each other; they often have grotesque facial expressions, even with some irony, and usually people beat drums and cheer around for fun, it is at least as lively as street acrobatics. The painter does not care about the anatomical correctness of muscles, but more so it shows an impression of power and playfulness in the rounded, knotted position of the trunk. In wrestling here, there are a hundred dramas in the Wa She Goulan, a technique for entertaining people; there is an exaggerated secular concern with body imagery and entertainment and folk vitality in the spirit of sport.

The classical wrestling images in Western countries, from "The Wrestler" in Ancient Greece to the sketches by Renaissance artists, are far more solemn. The two athletes' bodies shown on the screen were built based on strict anatomical knowledge, with each muscle stretched and contorted in the struggle. They have been distorted and bent by force, their forms compacted into one another, like a life and death struggle. On the blank foreground of the screen, everything is concentrated in the direct fight of hand to hand combat. Strong and powerful light falls on the undulating muscles, enhancing the sense of volume and the cruelty of struggle.

Wrestling here is the ultimate test of physical fitness, skill, and willpower, a direct dialogue between power and beauty, and even carries philosophical metaphors for conflict and harmony. The body image is monumental and heroic, while the spirit of movement is about the beauty of confrontation, conquest, and pure power.

6. Conclusion

It is not difficult to find through comparative analysis of body image construction methods and transmission pathways of sports spirit that sports painting in China and the West is walking on two completely different paths of art and culture. In the future, the exploration of body image and sportsmanship can also be extended to fields such as photography, film, new media art, as well as more topics such as female sports image and disabled sports, which are constantly opening up new perspectives and inspirations for us to understand the body and culture.

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