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Fossil Peonies and Birds, Master of Arts in Studio Art Thesis

A thesis
presented to
the faculty of the Department of Art and Design
East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree
Master of Arts in Studio Art

by
Jing Jing
May 2011

Anita DeAngelis, Chair of Committee
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Keyword: Fossil Peonies and Birds, Chinese Painting, Flower-and-Bird

ABSTRACT

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by

Jing Jing

Because of influences of Chinese flower-and-bird paintings, I created a series of fossil peonies and birds paintings. This paper describes the concept of this series, materials, creative process, cultural and contextual influences, and the artists who inspired my works. Several problems I encountered during the creative process were addressed and have been solved to my satisfaction. My concept was influenced by my desire to combine Western painting techniques with Eastern topic and style.

CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT.....	2
Chapter	
1. CONCEPT	4
2. MATERIALS	5
3. PROCESS	7
4. ABOUT CULTURAL AND CONTEXTUAL INFLUENCES RELEVANT TO MY WORK	10
5. ARTISTS WHO HAVE INFLUENCED OR INSPIRED MY WORK	14
6. CATALOG OF EXHIBITION	16
7. SUMMARY	24
WORKS CITED	26
VITA.....	27

CHAPTER 1

CONCEPT

The concept of fossil peonies and birds paintings is based on the Chinese traditional flower-and-bird paintings. The fossilized peonies are inspired from the sea lilies fossils (330 million years old Early Carboniferous Iowa) which are exhibited in the National Museum – Natural History in Washington D.C. In my work, the striking beauty of death is expressed by the fossil peonies and contrasted with the live beauty of birds. The series of paintings uses the Western painting technique, oil painting, to describe the Eastern topics and Eastern styles.

CHAPTER 2

MATERIALS

The materials used for this series of paintings were oil colors, soft charcoal pencils, and linen canvases. Burnt Sienna, Mars black, and titanium white were main pigments for the images of the fossils. Sky blue, scarlet, and cadmium yellow were used to depict the feather colors of birds. Hard charcoal pencils were used for contour profiles. I chose unstretched one-sided gessoed linen and painted on the un-gessoed side.

The reason for choosing linen canvas is linen's color similarity to the color of fossils. The un-gessoed side could absorb more water and colors. The surface allowed the paintings to blur which benefits the effects of the paintings. By coating one side of the linen with gesso, the unstretched canvas remains flat. Before deciding upon the final material, I did some tests on rice paper and the gessoed side of canvases. Rice paper is the traditional material of Chinese painting and works perfectly for Chinese painting pigments. However, neither the rice paper nor Chinese painting pigments can reflect the concept of using the Western painting technique, oil painting, to depict the Eastern topic and Eastern style to my satisfaction. I also tried other materials, like watercolor paper, watercolor paints, Chinese ink, and conte crayons. But none of them can really support the Western painting styles for the flower-and-bird painting successfully.

I did research on the colors of fossils and birds too. Fossil colors are based on the mineral colors of the stone because a fossil is no longer the organic item and has been mineralized. The common fossil minerals are copper, cobalt, manganese, iron oxides,

sulfur, manganese oxides, and silica. Below is a list of these minerals' colors:

Mineral	Color
Copper	Green, blue
Cobalt	Blue, purple
Manganese	Pink
Iron Oxides	Red, brown
Sulfur	Yellow
Manganese Oxides	Black
Silica	White, gray

Table 1. List of Minerals' Colors Adapted from sharkteethrus.com

According to the list, I used burnt Sienna related to iron oxides, Mars black related to manganese oxides and titanium white related to silica as the main colors of fossils. Other colors are added into different paintings as a distinguishing feature for each fossil painting and to associate the fossils with bird colors.

CHAPTER 3

PROCESS

The first step to paint the peonies and birds series is a sketch which determined the composition of a painting and the basic shapes of fossils and birds. The references of the shapes of fossils were mostly from the fossil pictures found online. Sometimes, I also kneaded a design into a kneaded rubber eraser to create a fossil shape as a visual reference. The kneaded rubber eraser helped me create more kinds of shapes and gave me more viewpoints to observe a better composition. The postures of birds were referenced from Chinese magnolia and peony meticulous line drawing art. The positions of birds were determined by the composition of fossils in these paintings.

Choosing a thumbnail which has a well balanced composition to start each painting is the second step. Then, using a charcoal pencil I drew the contour profile of fossils and birds. In this step, I preferred hard charcoal pencils because soft charcoal pencils always produce more pulverized charcoal than hard charcoal pencils on canvas. I used meticulous painting skills for drawing the contour profile. Meticulous painting is an important part of Chinese traditional painting. Meticulous Paintings, literally "detailed strokes", are paintings characterized by fine brushwork. In contrast with Freehand Brushwork Paintings, another Chinese paintings category that is characterized by simple and bold strokes intended to represent the exaggerated likenesses of the objects, Chinese Meticulous Paintings focus a lot on details. Classical examples of this school are Imperial-court paintings of the Ming Dynasty, Qiu Ying's figure paintings of the Ming Dynasty, and Shen Quan's Flowers and Birds of the Qing Dynasty.” (cultural-china.com)

During this process of painting, I focused on detailing the direction changes of the contours by establishing several smooth curves.

The next step is to apply oil paint to the linen. For first layer, I tried to cover all areas of fossils and birds with very thin colors and keep these areas transparent. Then I filled the one solid color as the second layer for fossils. According to the contours of fossils, I added darker transparent color on the surface of fossils to create dimensional effects and make the fossils look bumpy. After that, I added a third layer to deepen some of the shadows to make fossils appear more three dimensional. I repeated this darker process until the shading depicted adequate variety. For the peonies which lay on fossils, I depicted the color of contours unevenly and made the contours different thicknesses. I repeated this step until the shapes of the peonies looked perfect.

Next, I added highlights for the fossil peonies to increase the depth of the painting, considering the light direction to make sure the position of highlights help present more layers and depth of fossils. This also defined the thickness of the peonies.

After adding highlights, I started to fill colors in the bird shapes. The process of painting the birds is very similar to coloring the fossils. The only different skill used for birds is in the highlighting process. The feathers of birds are very tiny and smooth. I used my fingers instead of brushes to smudge the oil paints on the bird feathers. This allowed me to keep the painting clean and presented the feathers delicately.

After the shading and highlighting process, the last step was adding shadows for both the fossils and birds. Because of the linen texture and color, I used multiple layers of transparent oil paint to create shadows to increase the sense of space. The color of birds is always much brighter and more intense than fossil colors. So I added a very thin layer of bird color on the fossils and shadows to help unify all area of the paintings. Finally, I always walked far away from the painting to examine deficiencies in each of the painting and make necessary adjustments to finish the work.

CHAPTER 4

ABOUT CULTURAL AND CONTEXTUAL INFLUENCES RELEVANT TO MY WORK

Peonies are a symbol of prosperity in Chinese Imperial time and have a long history as ornamental plants in China.

“Peonies were known in China as far back as perhaps 1000 BCE. It was not however until the seventh century, during the reign of the Emperor Yang (605-617) of the Sui dynasty, that peonies were thought to have been grown as ornamental plants.

During the T'ang dynasty that followed (618-906) peonies supposedly became very popular in the Imperial gardens and they were put under Imperial protection. The best varieties commanded huge prices and peonies were often part of a dowry settlement.”

(Gloria)

“During the Sung dynasty, which began at the end of the tenth century, peonies had spread throughout China, and the Sung capital of Louyang became a centre for peony culture. Today Louyang is still recognized as a centre for peony culture. Each year in April, Louyang holds a festival to celebrate the peony.

As new dynasties began and emperors moved their courts, peonies were also moved, adding to the widespread cultivation of peonies throughout China.

During the Ch'ing dynasty of 1644 to 1911 the city of Caozhou, like Louyang before it, became a centre for peony culture. Today this city is known as HeZe and is recognized as the other major peony centre in China. Like Louyang, HeZe holds an International Peony Fair each year in April.” (Gloria)

The long history of peonies in China affects Chinese cultural both in the past and today. In 2009, Chinese scientists boasted their research could make peonies bloom at will. This declaration also proved that peonies are still the favorite flower to the Chinese today. The following paragraphs are the Chinese scientists’ expressions: “Scientists here in the "city of peonies" said Monday that they can bring the plants into full bloom any day of the year.”

“There will be blooming peonies at any festival, whether it's the national Founding Day holiday in October or the Spring Festival that marks the end of winter under the lunar calendar,” said Ma Zhuohua, vice director of the Luoyang Peony Research Institute in the central Henan Province.

Ma's institute boasts the country's largest peony gene bank. “We are also able to extend the flowering time, normally three to five days, to nearly a month,” Ma said.

“We use both physical methods, such as the control of temperature and light, and chemical methods such as spraying chemicals on the flower buds and leaves,” said Fan

Peirong, an engineer with the institute.” (Xinhua)

In Chinese culture, peonies have been regarded as a symbol of wealth, fortune, luck, prosperity, and happiness. Because of the enjoyment of peonies, the flower became an important topic in traditional Chinese flower-and-bird paintings. However, I did not want to follow the format of traditional Chinese flower-and-bird paintings to depict the peonies in my work. I wanted to paint in a different way to give the peonies a different meaning in my paintings. After I saw the sea lilies fossils in National Museum – Natural History, I was able to find an appropriate way to depict the flowers. The beauty of sea lilies fossils really shook my heart deeply at the moment. I was surprised that the ancient dead plants can be preserved miraculously. The texture of the fossils and the various postures of sea lilies looked so amazing to me. This pivotal experience inspired me to learn about flowering plants fossils. In the book, *Plant Fossils: The History of Land Vegetation Fossils Illustrated*, I learned some basic information about flowering plants.

“Flowering plants, or angiosperms as they are more properly called, have dominated most terrestrial ecosystems of the world for the last 100 million years. Today, there are nearly 24,000 species in a bewildering variety of forms. They live in a greater range of environments, show a greater range of growth habits and morphological variation, and are represented by more families’ genera and species than any other group of living vascular plants. Angiosperms form the basic diet of most herbivorous animals today and we, ourselves, rely on them for agriculture, horticulture, and many pharmaceutical products. Their importance to man has inevitably caused much interest in

the origins and early evolution of angiosperms, and they has been considerable work done on their fossil history” (Christopher J.Cleal).

The book also told me how to identify whether the plant is flowering plant. The presence of a flower, enclosed ovules or seeds, a double protective layer, wood with vessels, the development of the food conducting phloem, multi-layered tectate pollen walls consisting of pillar-like structures, reticulate venation pattern in the leaves and the distinctive double fertilization mechanism are the features of flower plants which helped me describe my fossil peonies accurately (Christopher J.Cleal).

CHAPTER 5

ARTISTS WHO HAVE INFLUENCED OR INSPIRED MY WORK

There are three artists who have influenced my fossil peonies and birds paintings. They are Wan An, Glendon Mellow, and John James Audubon.

Wan An is a Chinese peony painting artist. He was born in Luoyang in China in 1953. Now, he is vice president of the China Painting and Calligraphy Maestro Art Research Association. He is very interested in peony Meticulous Painting. The vivid colors, graceful postures of peonies, and background graduations are features in his paintings. Wan An's peonies paintings, National Beauty and heavenly Fragrance (46"x46", rice paper, Chinese painting pigments, 2006) and Blooming Flowers and Full Moon (13"x18", rice paper, Chinese painting pigments, 2006) inspired me to create more vivid postures of peonies.

Another artist who inspired me is Glendon Mellow, B.F.A. When I decided to paint fossil peonies, I found Glendon Mellow. He did some fossil paintings, like Mythical Flying Trilobite Fossil III (Oil on shale, pencil, and some digital painting, 2009) and Ammonite Form (Oil on slate, 2010) which gave me some ideas to start my work.

The third artist who is very important to my work is John James Audubon (April 26, 1785 –January 27, 1851). He was a French-American ornithologist, naturalist, hunter, and painter. He drew birds as a hobby. His bird portraits are mostly life-size and highly

dramatic. When I paint birds for my Fossil Peonies and Birds series, I always thought about the birds' postures and the unique expression techniques of birds' feathers in John James Audubon's paintings.

CHAPTER 6

CATALOG OF EXHIBITION

The images below are the eight works that are included in my thesis exhibition, Fossil Peonies and Birds, held at Slocumb Galleries on campus of East Tennessee State University from April 18th to April 22nd, 2011. All works were completed in 2011.



Fossil Peonies and Red Bird,

Oil painting on linen, 21'x18', 2011

The material of the fossil in this painting consisted of a combination of manganese oxides and silica. The red bird (Zhu Que in Chinese) is one of four spiritual creatures in Chinese mythology. The other three are Tortoise, White Tiger, and Dragon.

The four Chinese mythical animals associated with the four cardinal directions. Tortoise is the emblem of the North. White Tiger is the emblem of the West. Dragon is the emblem of the East. Red Bird is the emblem of the South.



Fossil Peonies and Sparrows

Oil painting on linen, 21'x18', 2011

The material of the fossil in this painting consisted of a combination of manganese oxides and iron oxides. The sparrows in China were recognized as pests during the Great Leap Forward from 1958 to 1962, because they ate grain seeds. Now, sparrows are considered as national secondary protected animal in China.



Fossil Peonies

Oil painting on linen, 21'x18', 2011

The material of the fossil in this painting consisted of a combination of manganese oxides, iron oxides, and sulfur. The spirit of peonies is painted by the very thin charcoal contours on the right top of the painting.



Fossil Peonies and Magpie

Oil painting on linen, 21'x18', 2011

The material of the fossil in this painting consisted of a combination of manganese oxides and iron oxides. Magpies symbolize happiness and good luck in Chinese culture. Magpies are also regarded as the envoy of good luck.



Fossil Peonies and Oriole I

Oil painting on linen, 21'x18', 2011



Fossil Peonies and Oriole II

Oil painting on linen, 21'x18', 2011

The material of the fossil in the top two paintings consisted of a combination of manganese oxides and iron oxides. Orioles are famed for their beautiful feathers and song in China.



Fossil Peonies and Mountain Bluebird I

Oil painting on linen, 21'x18', 2011

The material of the fossil in this painting consisted of a combination of manganese oxides and silica.



Fossil Peonies and Mountain Bluebird II

Oil painting on linen, 21'x18', 2011

The material of the fossil in this painting consisted of a combination of manganese oxides, iron oxides, and cobalt.

I wanted to add more rich colors for my bird paintings, so I chose the Mountain Bluebird which is a kind of common bird in American West for the top two paintings. The Mountain Bluebirds have sky blue feathers which attracted me.

CHAPTER 7

SUMMARY

This was my first time to paint fossils from my imagination. I became more and more familiar with creating shapes of fossils, observing the changes of colors of a stone, associating objects in one painting, and having a perspective view. What I learned during the creative process presents itself in the fossil peonies and birds series.

Researching on the materials and testing was a very important step to my paintings. This researching benefited my paintings. References and artists I listed in the paper influenced me to take more things into consideration. The concept of fossil peonies and birds compelled me to give greater meaning to my paintings.

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