

The Expression Path of Seal Brushwork in the Freehand Style of Seal

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Abstract: This paper explores the path of presenting seal script brushwork in freehand style seal art. Starting from the intrinsic connection between the ink characteristics of seal script and the artistic pursuit of freehand seals, it systematically analyzes the logical origin, integration pathways, and innovative practice directions for transforming seal script brushwork into freehand seal art. The study reveals that the line texture, structural charm, and compositional spirit of seal script form the core foundation of freehand seal art expression. Through the transformation between solid and void in lines, the reorganization of structural openness and closure, and the interconnected energy in composition, the deep integration of seal script brushwork into freehand seals can be achieved. Combining contemporary freehand seal creation practices, this paper also explores the balance between inheriting and innovating seal script brushwork, providing theoretical references for the modern development of freehand seal art while expanding the expressive dimensions and cultural connotations of traditional Chinese seal art.

Keywords: seal script brushwork; freehand style seals; line transformation; structural reconstruction; composition and rhythm

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1. Foreword

In the millennia-long evolution of traditional Chinese seal art, two major aesthetic traditions—meticulous precision and freehand expression—have emerged. The freehand style of seals is fundamentally characterized by “valuing meaning over form,” emphasizing the natural expression of creators’ inner emotions and spontaneous articulation of artistic individuality. The cultivation of this artistic ethos has always been deeply nourished by the brushwork essence of seal script. As the foundational calligraphic form of seal art, seal script’s rounded and refined line textures, symmetrical structural features, and well-arranged compositional layouts have laid a solid foundation in brushwork techniques and profound cultural heritage for freehand seals. In contemporary freehand seal creation, accurately capturing the core characteristics of seal script brushwork and transforming them into artistic vocabulary that aligns with freehand aesthetic demands has become a crucial mission to break through formal constraints and highlight the zeitgeist of the era. Based on this consideration, this paper systematically explores the specific manifestations of seal script brushwork in freehand style seals, aiming to deepen our understanding and cognition of the inheritance and innovation of traditional seal art.

2. The core characteristics of seal script brushwork

2.1. The texture attribute of lines

To explore the expressive path of seal script brushwork in the freehand style, it is essential to first clarify the true connotation of “freehand”. The term “freehand” is widely used in Chinese art. When discussing freehand art, people often associate it with artistic images characterized by spontaneity, boldness, and simplicity, or view it as an art form contrasting with meticulous craftsmanship. While this perspective on technical execution is not inherently flawed—freehand art indeed possesses features of conciseness, spontaneity, and roughness that fundamentally differ from meticulous art—such superficial understanding remains prevalent in artistic discourse. Seal script lines consistently adhere to the fundamental principle of “central tip brushwork”, creating a “steel-like roundness” texture. This texture arises from the even diffusion of ink on paper and the continuous transmission of force, embodying the aesthetic philosophy of “harmony of strength and suppleness” in traditional Chinese aesthetics. The lines of seal script are never monotonous traces of uniform motion; they contain subtle rhythmic undulations. For freehand seals, the roundness and strength of seal script lines constitute the core manifestation of their “metallic and stone aura”, while the dynamic turns imbue them with “scholarly elegance”. The interplay between these dual qualities collectively forms the foundation of the expressive language in freehand seal script.

2.2. The expression of the meaning of structure

The structural composition of seal script is fundamentally characterized by “symmetrical balance.” Whether it’s the pictographic forms of oracle bone script, the robust and imposing style of bronze script, or the orderly layout of small seal script, all demonstrate an unwavering pursuit of “balance” aesthetics. This symmetry is not a mechanical mirror image but rather conceals subtle variations within an overall balanced framework. For instance, bronze script structures often feature nuanced adjustments in character sizes and flexible handling of stroke lengths. Such “variation within symmetry” endows seal script compositions with rich artistic charm^[1]. The aesthetic essence of seal script composition also manifests in the fusion of “pictographic elements” and “abstract expression.” Early seal scripts retained numerous pictographic components, depicting objective forms through curved/straight lines and density arrangements. As seal script evolved, these pictographic elements gradually transformed into pure line symbols while maintaining their internal imagery. The expressive intent was amplified through line combinations, creating more generalized artistic conceptions. Freehand seal carving directly absorbs the core aesthetic expressions of seal script composition. On one hand, it maintains stability through symmetrical balance; on the other hand, it breaks free from rigid structural norms by employing exaggeration, deformation, and slanting techniques. This approach enhances the dynamic tension and distinctive characteristics of the composition, ensuring both adherence to seal script’s artistic essence and alignment with the freehand style’s aesthetic appeal of “unconstrained individuality.”

3. The transformation path of seal script brushwork in freehand seal painting

3.1. The transformation of line reality and illusion

The brushwork charm of seal script is primarily shaped through brush movements like lifting, pressing, pausing, and varying speeds. In contrast, freehand seal stamps utilize carving techniques such as thrusting, cutting, scraping, and chiseling on stone surfaces. The distinct mediums necessitate a “transformation between solid and void” when adapting seal script to freehand stamps. Here, the “solidity” of seal script manifests through ink variations in density and dryness, while the “solidity” of freehand stamps is expressed through carved depth and thickness. Artists must transform the “void” in seal script’s brushwork into the “void” of carving, creating lines with similar layered texture and rhythmic cadence^[2]. The brush control variations in seal script can be replicated in freehand stamps through adjusted carving pressure: light strokes produce delicate lines resembling the “lifting stroke” effect, while heavy cuts create robust lines akin to the “pressing stroke” technique. The “flying white” effect in seal script’s lines is simulated through rapid chiseling that creates cracked stone surfaces. This approach preserves the fluid elegance of ink brushwork while blending the rugged texture of stone

carving, achieving a seamless fusion of brushwork charm and chiseling language.

3.2. Reconstruction of structure opening and closing

The regular structural paradigm of seal script provides a stable framework for freehand seal carving. However, the essence of freehand style lies in breaking conventional patterns and highlighting creative individuality. Therefore, the transformation of seal script brushwork into freehand seals requires the process of “reconstructing structural openness and closure”. “Openness” represents an essential category in traditional Chinese aesthetics, where “open” signifies the expansion and outward expression of structural composition, while “closure” denotes compactness and inward restraint. The inherent open-closed relationship in seal script structures is evident: small seal script predominantly exhibits “closure” with minimal “openness”, presenting an inwardly focused aesthetic quality; while bronze script structures combine both “openness and closure”, featuring some strokes that are freely extended and others that are tightly condensed. Building upon the open-closed relationship of seal script, freehand seals further amplify this contrast—either expanding the extension range of character forms or narrowing their compactness—to create intense visual tension. When handling the “Da” character in seal script, traditional structural principles emphasize balance and harmony. In contrast, freehand seals can stretch the strokes of the left and right radicals to extreme extension, presenting an open structural posture, or compress the spacing between strokes to manifest a closed form. This open-closed reconstruction not only preserves the fundamental framework of seal script structures but also integrates the creator’s personal reflections, endowing the seal structure with distinct freehand characteristics.

3.3. The unifying spirit and rhythm of the composition

The composition of seal script is characterized by “spacious and well-structured” features, emphasizing symmetrical spacing between characters and orderly arrangement of rows and columns. Through subtle adjustments in character sizes and flexible placement of strokes, it achieves a coherent rhythm throughout the work. The vitality of seal script stems from the fluid texture of lines and intrinsic connections within structural frameworks. The continuous extension of lines and mutual resonance between structures create an organic whole. While freehand seal art directly inherits the compositional principles of seal script, it places greater emphasis on “the free flow of energy,” breaking away from the rigid row-and-column constraints of traditional script. By employing varied character sizes, slanted positions, and contrasted density, it cultivates a dynamic aesthetic style^[3]. In freehand seal art, the “spacious” quality of traditional script transforms into a “harmony of solid and void” layout principle. Artists skillfully use negative space to create contrast between localized “solidity” and overall “void,” guiding viewers’ gaze to achieve seamless energy flow. The interplay of characters in freehand seals further enhances the responsive relationships found in traditional script. Through the interweaving, yielding, and echoing of strokes, each component connects seamlessly, producing an artistic effect of “unified creation” that embodies the aesthetic essence of freehand style as “harmonious and natural.”

4. The innovative expression of seal calligraphy brushwork in freehand seal painting

4.1. The contemporary expansion of ink language

In the evolving landscape of contemporary art, freehand seal carving has transcended traditional seal script’s brushwork conventions. Rooted in the essence of seal script, this art form now integrates calligraphic techniques from other scripts with modern artistic expressions, expanding the expressive potential of ink language. Artists blend the angular strokes of clerical script with the dynamic flow of running script into seal script compositions, creating lines that retain the rounded strength of seal script while embodying the vigorous spirit of clerical script and the graceful rhythm of running script. This fusion significantly enhances the expressive power of line work. Contemporary freehand seal carving also incorporates Western abstract art principles, using line segmentation, composition, and color layering to break free from traditional

monochromatic limitations, giving seal art a more modern visual identity. Such innovation remains rooted in the essence of seal script's brushwork philosophy, serving as an expansion of ink language through profound understanding of its spiritual core. This approach breathes new life into seal script's artistic expression in contemporary freehand seal carving, allowing its traditional spirit to flourish anew.

4.2. Modern interpretation of cultural connotation

The brushwork of seal script is not merely a technical skill, but also embodies the cultural and spiritual essence of China's traditions. Concepts such as the natural philosophy of "harmony between heaven and humanity" and the value pursuit of "moderation and harmony" are all embedded within it. In contemporary freehand seal carving, creators reinterpret the brushwork of seal script to integrate the spirit of the times into seal art, making seals an important medium for conveying modern cultural concepts. When expressing themes like "environmental protection" and "peace," creators can leverage the fluid characteristics of seal script lines to create a harmonious and natural artistic atmosphere through smooth and expansive strokes. When showcasing themes such as "innovation" and "breakthrough," they can break the rigid structure of seal script characters by employing exaggerated and deformed compositions alongside vigorous and crisp lines, thereby conveying the contemporary spirit of daring to transcend^[4].

4.3. Breakthrough and innovation of aesthetic concepts

Traditional seal art, steeped in the "beauty of harmony," tends to express aesthetics with restrained subtlety. Contemporary freehand seal art, however, emphasizes the ultimate manifestation of individual expression. This innovative breakthrough in aesthetic philosophy also requires a foundation rooted in the brushwork of seal script. The personal elements inherent in seal script brushwork often remain subtle in traditional seals. In contemporary freehand seal creation, artists interpret and transform these brushwork elements through personalized approaches, fully infusing their emotions, temperament, and aesthetic orientations into the creative process. Bold and unrestrained creators may emphasize the robust texture of seal script lines and the expansive structural composition, giving seals a grand and majestic style, while meticulous and refined creators might focus on the fluid charm of seal script lines and the delicate arrangement of structures, endowing seals with an elegant and graceful elegance. This personalized expression grounded in seal script brushwork breaks the singular aesthetic framework of traditional seals, allowing freehand seal art to manifest diverse developmental dimensions. It simultaneously injects new vitality into the contemporary inheritance of China's traditional seal art.

5. Epilogue

As the essential brushwork foundation of traditional seal art, the brushwork essence of seal script provides solid theoretical support and practical basis for creating expressive-style seals. Its core characteristics—line texture, structural charm, and compositional rhythm—are achieved through transformations in line density, reconfiguration of structural relationships, and harmonious arrangement of compositional flow. This enables a seamless transition to the chisel-engraved language of expressive seals. In contemporary artistic contexts, through the expansion of brushwork techniques, modern reinterpretation of cultural connotations, and innovative aesthetic concepts, the brushwork essence of seal script demonstrates vibrant vitality and abundant creative potential. Exploring its expressive pathways in contemporary seal art not only deepens our understanding of traditional seal art's inherent developmental patterns but also clarifies creative directions for modern expressive seal works, driving innovative breakthroughs in the inheritance and evolution of traditional seal art.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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