

Instruments, Materials and Wang Duo's Calligraphy

Xue, Longchun
Nanjing Arts University

Abstract

Although the saturated ink and unrestrained brush strokes in the surviving calligraphic works by Wang Duo seem to suggest a lack of attention to the quality of the materials, existing records point to the contrary. Highly particular about his writing instruments, Wang Duo favored such quality materials as the ink brushes produced in Huzhou, the ink sticks produced in Huizhou, the Duan inkstone, the silk and satin manufactured in Songjiang, and the Xuande paper. Materials of inferior quality not only disrupted Wang's enthusiasm for composing, but also reduce the expressiveness of his calligraphic works.

On the one hand, Wang Duo's own discussions of writing instruments and materials in his colophons help to illuminate certain formal aspects of his works. On the other, the formal qualities of his surviving works are also indicative of the instruments and materials he had used. Generally speaking, works executed with materials of superior quality usually exhibit polished and fluid brush strokes in smooth and rich ink tones. Those rendered with inferior tools, however, oftentimes contain broken and sometimes angular strokes as well as abrupt transitions between thick and thin lines. The contrast between saturated and dry ink also appears starker in these works. Interestingly, present day scholars often regard the latter group of works as representative of Wang Duo's calligraphy. This divergence between the artist's own opinions of his work and the opinions of the later generations poses a difficult problem for research on ancient calligraphy.

Keywords: Writing instruments Wang Duo, late Ming and early Qing dynasty, calligraphy