

# Mediums and Creation — A Case Study of Illustration

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## Abstract

This study uses the illustration of “ I'm Willing ” to explore with the relationship and the link between mediums and artworks. The main purpose is to depict the process of use of mediums in creative work<sup>1</sup>. I hope it can benefit development of art education theories and practice.

I have adopted the in-depth interview approach to collect information from the artist, his memory of and objects used in the creative process. The focus of the study is on the role of mediums and how the artist used them. Two important questions to ask in the in-depth interview were what mediums were used and how they were used. I adopted

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<sup>1</sup> The idea for the study arose in conversations of activity theory at the workshop of “Looking for the Shakespeare in digital ages: expertise on digital tools” held in 2005/08-2006/07. Thanks to Dr.Chung Wei-Wen, Dr.Chen Pai-Lin, Dr.Chen Shun-Hsiao, Chen Ya-Hui, Chiang Jing-Zhi, Yang Shu-Fen, Zhuo,Feng-Zhi, Yu Jen-Ping, Lin Wen-Chi, Lee Chao-An, Chen Chiu-Wen, Zhou Jing-Long for thoughtful discussion, remarks and encouragement.

theory of discovery and experimentation of materials could then be freed from the confinement of material substances used in creation. Only so, was it possible to place the materials (referred to as mediums here) used to complete the creative work under social and cultural context for observation. However, the broad definition also resulted in a range of discussion too extensive for me to demonstrate my analysis in spite of the division of the creative process into the early, the middle and the late periods. At the same time, the analysis of the life context under which each medium came into being can go deeper. In addition to the difficulty in expressing the “man-object interaction” with words, this is also my first attempt at such analysis and a certain degree of immaturity is obvious.

In conclusion, this study believes, a meaningful creative activity comes from the conviction in self-fulfillment and how to produce this conviction is an important issue. In the case study, the creator used photography, sketching and repeated drawing to sustain the drive for self-fulfillment, the self-challenge for complete art, and the actual execution. Discovery and use of mediums from the surroundings circled around his desire to create. This desire was inseparable from self-fulfillment while the conviction of self-fulfillment again intermingled with life context. Hopefully, this study can be of applicable value in urging us to contemplate and develop art education with originality.

association between the use of these mediums and the artist's life context. Speaking of "I'm Willing" alone, a complete creation has to be social. From the moment the creator began to forge the medium of "self-fulfillment," the work was already being carried out under social life context. On one hand, it was a dialog with the "in" concepts under the commercial environment; on the other hand, it was also a dialog with artists and paintings he had had contact with. Both had derived from the creator's interaction with objects in his life context. In analysis, mediums always come one after another. Whether material or non-material, they serve as bridges for the choices and links between the creator and his works in the process of development. Non-material mediums (concepts, principles, methods) directed the creator to use a sketchbook and a pencil as instruments to discover, contact and perceive materials and to clarify the vague but beautiful image. On the other hand, material mediums, such as the camera, movies, under the creativity principle concept, helped refine material mediums. The computer, imparting the work with the materiality for digital exchange, allowed the work, once it was completed, to become a medium itself to connect the creator and the community. The artist was thus able to return to and resume his dialog with the community after he accomplished his self-fulfillment.

Creative activities are carried out toward self-fulfillment. Standards (details of self-breakthrough) for whether the self-fulfillment could be achieved take shape after the artist acquires principle for creativity and methods for mediums, and he begins to use a series of tools in relation to judging criteria from the aspects of the human bone structure, light and shadows, colors, expressions, costuming and pots, etc., to achieve complete art. These tools have their contribution in the discovery and transformation of the materials for creation. One special tool has not been particularly mentioned in the analysis because it was almost a part in every stage of Zhou Jing-long's creative activity. That is "reference works of standard." Zhou Jing-long is not what most people would call a master. Whether we regard him an ace or a master, the "reference works of standard" were artworks that represented ideals in his mind. They did not have to be related to "I'm Willing", but for him they were extremely significant. When the "reference works of standard" were adopted as a medium throughout the entire process, they provided the drive to push the creative activity toward Zhou Jing-long's self-fulfillment.

This study started out from use of mediums. It allowed me to shift the focus from depicting an artist's frame of mind to understanding the man-object interaction throughout the creative process. By adopting a broad sense of definition for medium, the

recognition and esteem from other participants. This adds to their sense of value in the community they are in in real life (not online), just like the sense of pride people in the academic circle feel when their papers are published in a journal with the prestige of SSCI or TSSCI.

The creator has worked in the game industry and therefore feels a sense of affinity to such websites. At the same time, CG Talk is one of the more prestigious sharing forums. Members of this community include game, animation and comic artists and people from related industries in different regions and cultures. It is an international forum website. There is no lacking of artworks. On the contrary, many creative talents would like to share their works here. When a creative work gets response, besides being a positive factor for the artist's self-confidence, it can also enter the routine incentive mechanism of CG Talk. It works like a ranking system, selecting works of the month out of those winning good responses by a built-in reviewing mechanism and placing them in the best-of-the-month exhibition hall to extend their display time and visibility. Being able to prove your works can acquire certain recognition is definitely a positive in how you or others look at yourself.

Once an artwork is equipped with digital materiality, it can be placed in digital community activities through digital means. An artist's works cannot leave the society. Exhibitions and sharing are necessary. As digital tools become prevalent in personal life context, connecting individuals with the Internet will bring cross-region and cross-nation interactions. Advancements in technology do not only extend human needs and abilities, as in this case study, they also expand the cultural and social perceptions of people's bodies and minds. At the same time, through digitalization, imagination can become visual to a further extent to allow creation of vivid worlds in artworks (Burnett, 2005). One of the purposes of the interchanging use of movies, camera and computer graphics in this case study was to recreate near-realistic perception (a result of expression techniques).

## 5. Summary

To go back to the question of this study: What actions (man-object interactions) did the creator adopt in his creative process to accomplish creation? From the progress of an artwork, we can see how a creator uses different mediums to create an image and the

simulated the use of a real sketchbook, whereas Photoshop provided the canvas and related tools. But, in the end, the chief function of computer tools was to impart “I’m Willing” with materiality in the digital format.

The digital materiality allowed the artist to circulate and exchange his work in the digital world. It brought the creator the opportunity to join Internet communities with “I’m Willing” and he chose CG Talk (<http://forums.cgsociety.org/s>) to be the gallery for his work. The gallery was designed to allow interactions. Once an artwork enters the gallery, comments come from various sources. In such an environment, a created work is no longer isolated. It is linked up to the society. Even though this society is not familiar with the participants, social exchange is created between the creator and other participants.

#### 4.3.2 Life Context of Choice of Mediums and Ensuing Interactions

On the whole, use of tools in this period allowed the creator to proceed with his creation in a more economical approach. At the same time, it also helped transform the materiality of the work.

To transfer “I’m Willing” from the sketchbook to the computer, the most significant change was the enrichment of its materiality. In other words, the content from sketching did not have to lose its original quality. Quite the contrary, digitalization made it integrable for multimedia platforms. Such transformation is a tendency under modern social development. Painters and artists in the past had to organize social functions, commercial or not, to show the works they had created. Exhibition and sharing is an important link in art activities, despite that the motivation behind artistic creation is usually self-initiated.

Exhibition and sharing provides the opportunity for exchange of opinions and interpersonal interactions. It begins the sociality of art. In a commercial society, it is even more obvious that celebrities from various sectors are invited to attend exhibitions to demonstrate their taste through participation and commenting, and the exchange value of artworks or creations is thus established. Zhou Jing-long’s choice of CG Talk to display his work was a result of this website’s accessibility. This by no means implies use of the website but that his peers and work associates often visit such websites to exchange ideas and conduct discussion. Besides being beneficial to establishing personal relations between one another, use of this website can also reward them with positive



Fig. 9. Numbered images of scenes and characters in the sketchbook. Source: From Zhou Jing-long.

### 4.3. “I’m Willing”—the Late Period

The late period refers to the actions that took place near and after finish. The actions in this period turned from closed to open and the computer (medium) was used. When nearing finish, the computer provided flexibility for revision, such as color adjustment, modification, etc. After finish, the computer’s function to access the Internet allowed him to share his work with the international creative community (CG Talk).

#### 4.3.1 Mediums in the Late Period

After sketching and rearranging over and over, “I’m Willing” gradually became clear in the creator’s mind. Repeated selection and modification could have cost a lot of pigments and paper if conventional painting had been adopted. After all, it was impossible for a highly self-demanding artist to be satisfied with just one creative attempt. Digital computer tools played an important role in the near-finish stage. A computer pen and Photoshop became the mediums during this period. The computer pen

*your eyes. There are many things to deal with. Even two artists with equal sketching skills will come up with different results, especially the delicate features and colors. We can't say that copying nature is lowly work....*

Finally, there are the relations between movies, photographs and the sketchbook to discuss. With the assistance of computers, movie scenes can be captured and made into image files. Likewise, photographs can also be stored as image files by using computer software. Some of these massive image file data may become part of the sketchbook. The creator would mark these images in correspondence with their file names in order to facilitate reference search for feelings he needs during the creating process. But the sketchbook remained the creator's chief instrument. Movies and photos could expedite his grasp of the materiality of the contents of the painting; he still had to draw repeatedly to clarify the image in his mind. The computer could be a tool for coloring and occasionally serve as a platform for sketching, but it required electricity and was difficult to carry. In comparison, the sketchbook was convenient when inspirations struck. One thing worth mentioning here is a certain instrument the creator employed to produce 3D scenes also became handy in the process of creating "I'm Willing". As the scene was imaginary, the creator used 3DMAX to generate the perspective for the scene. Once he acquired the grasp of the perspective, the rest of the graphic work was easy.

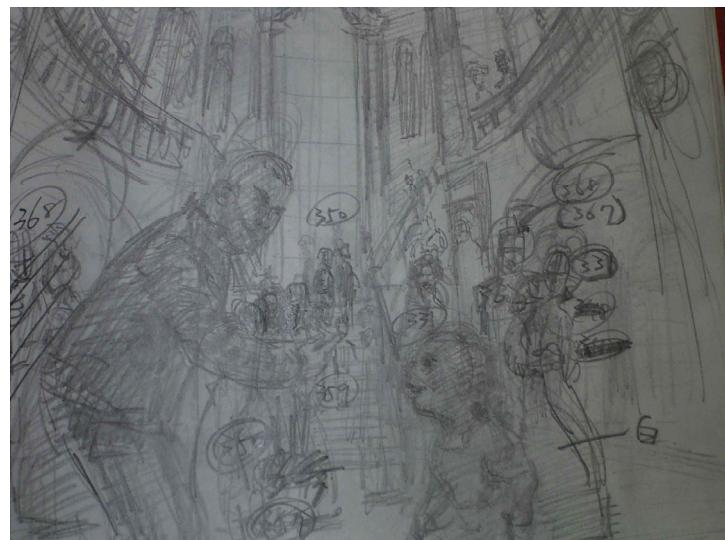


Fig. 8. Numbered images of scenes and characters in the sketchbook. Source: From Zhou Jing-long.

particularly important and that was the “most attractive part in the picture” to the creator. As a result, he decided on three elements for the characters in the picture: What is on his mind? What is he doing? Where is he?

Under such context, the “camera” became the medium to grasp the characters and the scene. This grasping is the understanding of the property of realisticness and liveliness. It became an approach of expression in the picture. It was not plagiarizing, vulgar or valueless. On the contrary, the camera could help the creator understand the materiality of the creative content, and that was the most significant because the content included sense of space, perspective, the human bone structure, the ambience, light and shadows, colors, hue distribution and expressions of the characters. Each one of these was an object with its special feature in the interaction in the picture. The attempt to grasp these special features was to try to seize the realisticness and liveliness for the entire picture. The use of camera was of enormous help in the creator’s understanding of the material property of the creative content.

Placing emphasis on a realistic approach was also the creator’s response to the concept of realistic expression that was in fashion. In other words, the topic was a realistic one that came from daily life. Before Cézanne, art was denounced for its concept of copying nature. The concept from Bauhaus’ teaching system began to have its sway, stressing that the author should be able to express his feelings and thoughts at liberty (Liu Qi-wei, 1999). Whether the view at the time meant art should not be realistic, in the creator’s environment, he could perceive that most people did not value “realistic topics” and would encourage depiction of unusual characters, out of wild and unchecked imagination, and eventually partiality to visions and creation of particular characters under the commercial environment. The creator thus presented his criticism on the general public’s perception of artistic imitation of nature as inferior:

*In art, copying external reality could be criticized as copying nature, but I don’t agree that such work is of a lower level. It is very difficult work. A very good scenery painter does not paint exactly what he sees. Many people may laugh that he is merely copying these things on the canvas and there’s no big deal. But I disagree. He must have a lot of ideas in his mind, such as how to handle the contour and background of each character, how to create the sense of space, how to allow someone’s uneven complexion to come out naturally, or to handle the expression of a character to make it so vivid like he’s standing right in front of*

#### 4.2.2 Life Context of Choice of Mediums and Ensuing Interactions

The creating method of “collecting information, sketching and rearranging” was the key conception to guide the creator in the man-object interaction. It took shape partly because of the creator’s idea of “complete art,” and partly due to his daily life practices.

For the creator, the material to be applied on the blank canvas almost all came from daily life activities. All kinds of visual images in daily life could be sources of information. The obscure “beautiful image” in his mind depended on his observation of people, things and objects in daily life to become clear. Sketching provided the link between daily life and the creation material. As far as creation is concerned, sketching, besides enabling the creator to understand the property of the creative content, also had the function of finding and brewing inspirations. All visible objects in daily life could be materials for brewing inspirations; therefore, sketching people, things and objects from daily life, after brewing for some time, would allow the inspirational materials to reconfigure in the mind. After understanding the relationship between the creator and daily life, it becomes easier for us to see the importance of the “movies” and “camera” to the creator.

First of all, movies are similar to theatrical shows; both belong to the same general art category. Nevertheless, movies are more diverse in image presentation. Through editing for the montage effect, movies offer multiple visual angles. Plus their equally theatrical narrative logic and thinking, reenactment of people’s social and cultural interactions in different eras and circumstances becomes possible. They come into our homes through television and allow us frequent contact. Therefore, in this case study, movies served as a medium for the creator to find and brew inspirations and understand the property of various social interactions throughout his creative process.

In his creative process, searching information online was a usual approach, but the Internet could not provide information on interactions in certain social circumstances for “I’m Willing”. The creator had to search in his own memory for possible relevant information. In this process, the movie “Titanic” kept flashing across his mind. As a result, he chose movies to be the approach to acquire his understanding of interactions in certain social circumstances. As much as the help from movie scenes the creator attained for his comprehension of interactions in particular social circumstances, illustrations were not the same as movies. The creator had yet all the work to do to express the scene in one single picture. Under such a premise, manifestation of “interactivity” became



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Fig. 6. Use of movies as an instrument to understand ballroom interactions and social class characteristics. Source: From Zhou Jing-long.



Fig. 7. Use of photography as an instrument to understand human bone structure.  
Source: From Zhou Jing-long.

was correct. He thought human postures and movements, sitting, running or other actions, could appear quite unusual sometimes. At the same time, the various elements of “complete art”, for the creator, were not independent but interrelated. Subsequently, having a grasp of the movements did not necessarily mean having the grasp of the expression when the characters were clothed. The pleats and creases, light and shadows, would not necessarily appear realistic and lively. Therefore, referring to photographs of real people became an important strategy for creating “I’m Willing”.

For the creator, realisticness and liveliness were skills of expression, not what most people understood as “duplication of external reality.” A camera does indeed have the function of duplicating external reality, but in the hands of the artist, there were other usages. The most common usage was to reproduce painted scenes, while another would be to help the creator decide on the approach to express the creative content from his thought. Of course, the creator’s replication of the scene of people in a photograph did not imply that he intended to copy the picture entirely. Quite the contrary, such replication could benefit the creative content, such as the examples of human bone structure, light and shadows, and color hues mentioned earlier.



Fig. 5. Sketches of Baroque architecture. Source: From Zhou Jing-long.

#### 4.2.1 Mediums used during creation

During creation of “I’m Willing”, besides continuing to use the mediums developed from the previous stage, the artist also added three more mediums: (1) creating method, (2) movies, and (3) camera. The creative method was the measure to bring creative fulfillment to realization; the movies provided characters; and the camera was the artist’s means to perform the “complete art” activities.

The creating method was primarily the substantialized action guideline for “complete art.” It was a rotation of the three elements of information collection, sketching and rearrangement. Although Baroque architecture was set as the backdrop for “I’m Willing”, such a scene did not exist in reality. It was the product of the creator’s imagination. Nevertheless, imagination did not pop out in the air. The creator gathered information on all kinds of Baroque structures by using his sketchbook. It allowed the creator to familiarize himself with the structures and styles of Baroque architecture and served as a medium for the interaction between the creator and “Baroque architecture.” The action of sketching deepened the impression of Baroque architecture through the creator’s repeated drawing and generated a link between the creator and “Baroque architecture. The link was not the appearance of a single construction, but the integrated impression of a variety of structures. At this point, the impression in his mind also became an instrument for the creator, a medium for him to use to rearrange the various landscape elements.,

For the creator, use of movies (medium) for the painting of “I’m Willing” had its significant function that was fully expressed in the design of the ballroom scene. The creator wanted to create the ballroom scene but his understanding of the social class and the situation that he meant to present was limited. This understanding included costuming, gestures and likely interactions of the upper class. As a medium, movies brought the image in his mind closer to the historic context in real life. The plots and costumes reproduced in movies might not be entirely historically correct, but for the creator, the issue was to obtain a better picture of ballroom parties and interactions of a certain social class. What he wanted to find out was the characteristics of interactions in a ball, a specific social circumstance.

The use of the camera for “I’m Willing” was tangible execution of “complete art” activities. Take the human bone structure for example. When the creator imagined the movement or posture of the old man, he could not help wondering if the bone structure

bother. There is a great difference between the thinking behind 2D and 3D painting. The latter relies on use of computer software; everything, a human figure, the facial structure, the hands, etc., has to be done under three-dimensional conception. In comparison, 2D graphics does not depend so much on computer software. “Complete imagery” is valued, including how to conceptualize the image, use of colors, and other factors.

Zhou’s desire to create the 2D “beautiful image in his mind” had derived from works that had moved him deeply. He pointed out that Norman Rockwell the illustrator was a source of inspirations that pushed him to create with the “situational” approach. As a result, the “beautiful image” in his mind also had the “situational” tendency. The warm scene of the old man inviting the little girl to dance in “I’m Willing” is a situational depiction that apparently could not have attracted his peers and work associates in the commercial environment because it is a realistic, instead of sci-fi, topic.

The creator’s thinking reflected the emphasis on the unrivaled “character setting” in the commercial environment he was in. Such a preoccupation apparently became an obstacle. “Character setting,” including the styling and accessories, is a commercialized guideline for creation. Such a guideline obviously was contradictory and conflicting to the fulfillment principle for “complete art.” It was under such context, Zhou felt that his creativity was being choked by commercial graphics and he was being dominated by commercial rules. Under such circumstances, the sketchbook became a tool with a significant meaning in the self-fulfilling creative activities Zhou initiated to protect himself from the interference and obstruction from commercial rules.

The mediums of the early period, the drive for creativity, the principle for creative fulfillment and discovering creating tools, are important instruments in the creative process. These instruments decide the choice of tools and the approach of interaction between the tools in the creative process.

#### 4.2. “I’m Willing”—the Middle Period

The creator’s inspirations came from collection and rearrangement of massive information. It is impossible to describe the process of rearrangement in his mind, but from his statement of “collection of massive information,” we can deduce that he frequently applied three mediums during this period: creating method, movies and camera.



Fig. 4. A portrait in the sketchbook. Source: From Zhou Jing-long.

#### 4.1.2 Life Context of Choice of Mediums and Ensuing Interactions

The creator in the case study completed “I’m Willing” chiefly under the motive of the “self-fulfillment” conviction that was closely related to his life context. After graduating from the Department of Fine Arts of National Taiwan University of Arts, Zhou Jing-long worked in 3D game production. Since art often has to serve the purposes of profits and market demand in commercial environments, there are usually less possibilities for creativity and the jobs are mostly consignment work. As there was no sense of self-ability promotion in such a work environment, Zhou Jing-long’s need for self-fulfillment grew stronger and eventually became a demanding motive. On one hand, it pointed out his longing for creative 2D illustration work; on the other hand, his dissatisfaction with commercial consignments surfaced.

As the condition for creativity in a commercial environment is very limited, development of individual ability gets confined, especially in the game industry where application of computer technology is emphasized. In the 3D work environment, Zhou often felt disturbed by the need to learn new software functions constantly. 3D technology advances rapidly and the workers are urged to learn new techniques. For Zhou Jing-long who had set his mind on creative 2D illustration work, this became a

his mind.” The manifestation of this plateau in his painting was a kind of self-fulfillment. The other aspect was responding to the doubts from his peers and work associates. “I’m Willing” belongs to this category. Such topics could not have conformed to the commercial forms and rules his peers and work associates identified themselves with and there were thus the challenge and experiment.

The principle for creative fulfillment came from the concept of “complete art.” The creator was convinced complete art should have the support of many things, such as “sense of space, perspective, human bone structure, ambience, light and shadows, colors, hue distribution, facial expressions, etc.,” for the viewer to judge its quality. The actual rendering derived from his comprehension of these elements; therefore, it was very important to understand the content of the “beautiful image in the mind” and this made the fulfillment principle throughout the creative activity process.

Eventually, he developed his mediums—a sketchbook and a pencil. The sketchbook served as a warehouse for all kinds of art elements and materials. It had the function of collecting various forms, lines, designs and patterns and made the reference database for “complete art.” The sketchbook worked as a medium and helped the creator realize the complete image by drawing out objects he observed. The objects of observation did not have to be external objects. They could be images flashing across his mind. Thus, before creation, the artist used a sketchbook and a pencil as instruments to develop the materials for his painting.

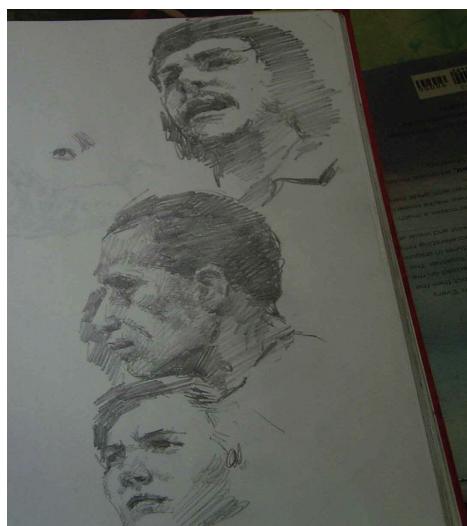


Fig. 3. Portraits in the sketchbook. Source: From Zhou Jing-long..

### 3.3. Case Study

The work “I’m Willing” by Zhou Jing-long, a young Taiwanese freelancing illustrator was chosen as the object of case study. There were two reasons: First, Zhou Jing-long once shared his work in international computer graphics forums. His use of photos for human postures and forms aroused my curiosity about his use of mediums in the creative activity process. The second reason was Mr. Zhou, a friend of mine from college, was willing to share his creative process with the public as reference for creativity study.

## 4. Analysis of the Process of Medium Adoption

### 4.1. “I’m Willing”—the Early Period

In the creative activity of “I’m Willing”, the early period was the most important stage. It was during this stage the drive for the creation, the conviction in “self-fulfillment” was developed. Such a conviction cannot be created out of nothing. It had come from the life context of the creator and had its substantial significance. Therefore, this study believes a creator needs to cultivate a certain “concept” out of his or her life context and turn it into an applicable medium. The following is the examination of the tools and their use during the early period of creation.

#### 4.1.1 Mediums in the Early Stage

The chief mediums (method, principle) the creator used during this period can be separated into three types: the drive for creativity, the principle for creative fulfillment and the creating tools. The two former types belong to abstract symbols and methods and the last is the exercises for actual application. They are all preparations for the creative process.

A creator needs a drive for creativity and, in this case, he adopted the “self-fulfillment” conviction as the basis for ensuing creative activities. The concept of drive for creativity was a medium that enabled the creative activity to continue. There were two aspects to it. One was challenging the creator’s own art skills, to surpass his present artistic abilities and to reach a plateau that he called, “painting out the beautiful image in

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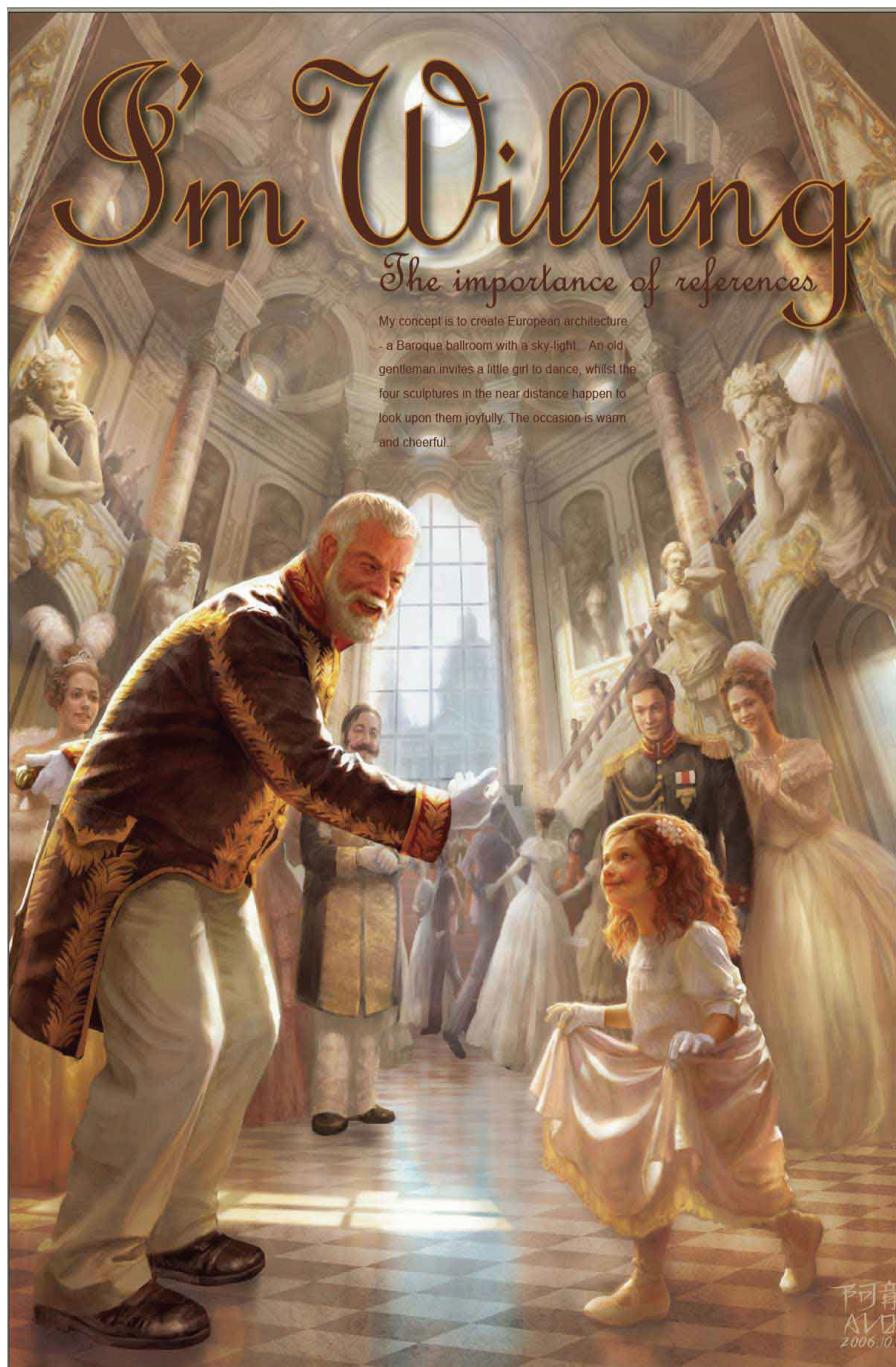


Fig. 2. "I'm Willing." Source: from 2006.11. 2D Artist Magazine

There are no structural questions during the interview but I will make inquiries based on the purpose and question of study (see attachment 1). Throughout the interview, I will try to understand the following:

- a. Under what motive and life context did the creator begin creative activities?
- b. What actions did the creator apply to facilitate creative activities?
- c. In these actions, which mediums are particularly meaningful and valuable to the creator?

Analysis of the information obtained from the interview is also conducted in line with the three periods. The descriptive framework of the activity theory (Nardi, 1996; Kuutti, 1996; Turner et al., 1996) is referred to for the framework of analysis to discuss the mediums the creator adopts in creative activities and the life context the creator is in (social group, regulations, target and motive). Discussion is divided into the two following sections:

- a. Which mediums did the creator interact with during each period?
- b. What is the life context of the creator's choice of these mediums? How did they interact to make creation possible?

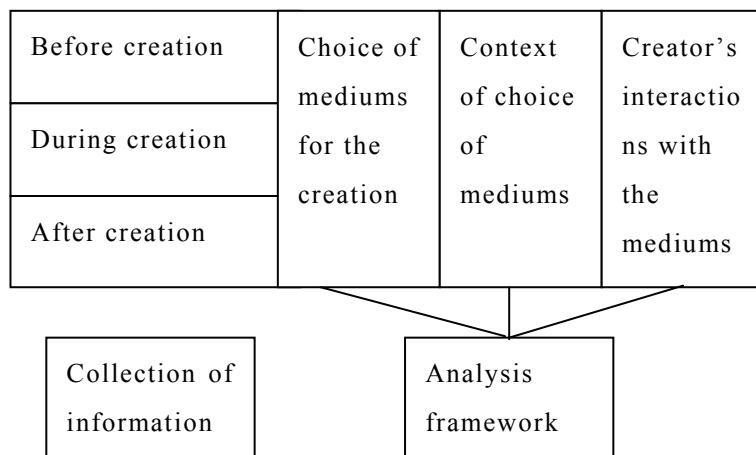


Fig. 1. Information collection and analysis framework

rely on language and what I intend to grasp is not the meaning of single words but the association between language and thinking. When Vygotsky (Li Wei [trans.], 1998) discussed the relationship between thinking and language, he thought thinking created a link, fulfilled a function and solved a problem. Thinking and expression through language are two different processes. Thinking is like the subtext in theater performances. It has its own structure with ideas hidden inside. Transition from thinking to language is no easy matter and direct exchange between minds is even more unlikely. Communication therefore can only be achieved indirectly, first processed through meaning and then into words. Thinking comes from stimulation of a motive; in other words, behind thinking there has to be the affective-volitional tendency for the content of thinking, not the meaning of words on the surface, to be understood through the grasp of desires and needs, interests and emotions.

Under this premise, this study believes we must first understand the purpose and motive of the creator before we can figure out the use of different mediums (actions) employed throughout the creative process to comprehend the particular meaning of his or her creative activity. An in-depth interview allows the researcher and the interviewed to have time for an uninterrupted dialog. Information thus collected may not cover entirely the thinking behind the creative process (this is neither possible nor the purpose of the resea

rcher,) but it will still be adequate enough to provide clues for the question of “how to create the possibility of creation (inspiration) out of man-object interaction.” In this study, the main concern remains what action (man-object interaction) the creator adopts in the creative process to achieve creation.

### 3.2. Study Question and Framework

My motive is the longing to understand the creative process. From the aspect of study, this is a descriptive approach. For the arrangement of the interview questions, this study has divides the creative process roughly into three periods: the early stage, the middle stage and the late stage. When conducting the actual interview, I will explain the purpose of study to the interviewee and ask the interviewee to describe the creative activities during these stages.

### 3. Study Method, Framework and Case Study

#### 3.1. Study Method

The interest of this study is in how creation takes place; therefore, artistic creative activities are certainly an area to explore. However, a researcher is not the creator and cannot describe the mysterious transition process in the creator's mind; except, based on the standpoint that art activities begin with use of materials (discovering and experimenting), creative activities should not be that difficult to put into words. What is to be discussed here is not the thinking process behind creation—how to pinpoint the topic, analyze and classify it, produce certain creative content out of reasoning and imagination, come up with the best option out of a number of choices, substantialize the original concept and evaluate the result (Wang Qi-min, 1997:26-29)—but how the creator interact with his life context and develop mediums to accomplish the creation.

In literature investigation this study has already narrowed down the range of materials: defining materials as simply creating tools. If they are defined, in a broader sense, as mediums to help carry out creation, the substantial expression of mediums in the interaction between man and materials is actually the action of a creative activity that supports and helps the progress of the activity. Therefore, I believe it is necessary to understand the mediums a creator employs to develop his or her artwork.

For this study, I adopt the in-depth interview approach to collect information on the mental process of an artist. We may not be able to experience the creative process, a thinking process, with the artist, but his language reveals the thinking behind the creativity and such thinking covers the creator's social, cultural and activity environments. Yet the difference between the thinking behind creativity and language is that thinking does not consist of independent units like language. When a creator intends to communicate a certain idea, such as "a barefoot boy in a blue coat running down the street," it is impossible to conceptualize every item—namely, the boy, his coat, the color of the coat, running and the bare feet—all at once. Therefore, I make the hypothesis that it often takes some time for a creator to manifest an idea. Although the entire idea may be instantaneous imagery to the creator in the creative process, to present it in language it has to be broken down and expressed piece by piece (Vygotsky, 1965; Li Wei, 1998:215).

Despite the dissimilarity between thinking and language, the analysis here has to

Apparently the “purpose” (or motive) is an essential element in the thinking process behind the creative activity. After all, in the process of use of materials, the “purpose” guides the individual to pay attention to certain things and makes the individual the subject of the activity. Only man can have motives and consciousness. This is a fundamental difference between man and objects. The relations between consciousness, man, and tools, are asymmetrica (Nardi, 1996:10-11). Perhaps knowing and comprehension exist as purposes in the beginning of all art activities and the corresponding result is to learn to use the materials, discover their materiality, and understand the special effects (to various human senses) in order to make the initial move. It is like regarding the applications of different tools and materials in regular classroom teaching as techniques, and turning each technique into a creative work in the teaching of the subject matter. However, the creative activity generated during this stage is a result from learning and comprehending a material and learning and comprehending the materiality of the material is the particular “purpose” of this creative activity.

We may call this a creative activity aimed at learning to apply materials, but the purpose and motive of creation are to get familiar with and understand each specific material. Such creative activities have the quality of learning and experimentation simultaneously, but not every creativity has the same purpose. Not all creative activities carry the purpose of discovering the materiality of substances. They might be geared toward combining with the purposes of other phases to create, such as to express social and cultural opinions or release inner emotions.

The purpose provides the impetus for the activity, but “activity,” with its connotation of activeness and liveliness, should not be simply regarded as the behavior of spending energy to obtain foreseeable results. Take the behavior of assembly line workers for example. Calling it a kind of activity merely refers to the behavior involved, not the “people” behind the behavior, without questioning the source of the workers’ interest in the activity or what external and internal forces are brought together. The same applies to artistic creative activities. They should be the consequence of the combination of different maneuvers and action phases. The mediums (tools and materials) employed in the process are all associated with the artist’s inner perception and therefore closely tied to his purpose.

the particularity of respective circumstances. Each activity requires a short transition. In other words, when linking the actions of the various steps or stages, the most significant part is “discovering and experimenting materials.” In essence, it is the transformation of objects (tools and materials) to stimulate “activity.” An object (tool or material) can be a substance such as a brush, or something less substantial like a project, or something completely intangible such as a concept. As long as it can be maneuvered in the activity and shared in the transformation, it is an object in that particular activity (Kuutti, 1996).

However, the concept of “materials” should not be limited to discussion of “which materials are used in the process of creation.” To avoid confusion, “mediums” is adopted here to replace “materials” in the narrow sense. This means, the issue should be, “which materials are adopted to develop creation?” Or, what mediums do artist employ to develop and complete a creative activity? The mediums referred to here include everything used in the process of a creative activity. Manmade objects should also be regarded as materials, including tools, symbols, machines, methods, principles, and forms of organization. They all have the characteristic of playing a mediating role (Kuutti, 1996). Bauhaus, for instance, accepted use of machines as creative tools, studied the approaches of mass production, and renounced the dividing line between pure art and applied arts (Wang Jiang-zhu, 1985 : 149). During the activity, these medium groups may not appear to have any direct relations such as a lumber jack makes his tree cutting tool and the tool becomes a medium between the lumber jack and his work object (producing wood). The object (wood) does not become visible and maneuverable because of what it is (tree) but because it is the product of tool application (cutting tree and making it into wood for various purposes such as building homes or other usages. ) In an artistic creative activity, man is the subject of creation, while the object to be created through the activity is realized through use of tools and materials.

Regardless of whether a material could become a tangible substance, we can still use it and try to understand its characteristics. Here we can look at such tools and materials as mediums for creation or to create objects. The definition of “medium” here shall be in the broadest sense, meaning as long as its characteristic is discovered in the process and applied to help achieve the artist’s purpose. The “purpose” here is undoubtedly an important element for bringing out materiality. If we neglected the sounds from beating different objects, we would not be able to recognize the musical qualities of these objects. The purpose points out the direction for the mind of the creator and the actions taken in the related creative activity are responses to this purpose.

shows that art classification is not absolute. Sometimes it is adopted for sake of convenience in discussion and, when doing so, we often differentiate according to the materials used, as within the range of our perception, and our knowledge of the materials used is associated with the human organs.

Jiang Xun (1995b) thinks, “a material may be seen as a substance, but it could also be an esthetic element.” I believe the reason that a material could become an esthetic element on one hand because the substance has its character capable of imbuing the artwork with a sense of beauty, such as the dissimilarities in the strokes of paintbrushes that manifest the qualities of different lines. On the other hand, there is also the user’s understanding of the results of the said substance’s interaction with other substances and such results chiefly come from the images we absorb through our visual, aural or perceptive senses. Our visual organs, for instance, are able to perceive the peculiarity and entity of the type, intensity, color, etc., of strokes of brushes rendered in combined applications in different calligraphy styles.

We can say that an art activity is a “process of discovering and experimenting materials” through the user to achieve various possibilities. This is a process that pivots on the man—object interaction. Art materials may be tangible substances but the objective is esthetic. Take music for example. All substances may have their musicality. When a child uses a stick to hit different objects at will, cups, plates or metal pots, he or she might be discovering the musicality of these substances as sounds are created. In spite of all kinds of synthesized or electronic mediums employed as new art materials in the neo—art era; the human mind is still required to really turn substances into art (Jiang Xun, 1995b: pp. 74-76).

## 2.2. Materials, Mediums and the Mind

Jiang Xun’s idea that materials are both substances and esthetic elements arouses the curious question: When and how in the process of an art activity are art materials turned into esthetic elements? What happens between the artist and the materials to allow the esthetic elements to take shape?

Here artistic creation is regarded as an “activity”, the process of an extended action. The difference between action and activity may be obscure but the latter can be roughly divided into three phases—the maneuvering phase, the action phase and the activity phase. To carry out an activity, it takes proper organization of varied actions in line with

## 2.1. Art Activities Begin with Materials

The definition of art varies with different people. It is not the intention of this study to discuss what art is or is not, for fear of exposing imperfections when giving a definition that is not sound enough. The focus of this section is: materiality of art activities.

One after another art department was created as a result of social specialization of art activities and artistic activities have been thus divided into different disciplines over time. Nonetheless, we are still able to identify types of art in line with common social and cultural nomenclature. The eight major divisions of art: painting, sculpture, architecture, music, literature, dance, theater and cinematography that we are familiar with are the standard demarcation of art studies today, while the subdivisions, such as digital games, multimedia design and visual design, etc., have also made their way into the ranks of art categories. However we divide the types and boundaries of art, when we talk about artistic creation, initial understanding of how these art types came about is a must.

It is not difficult to see in the eight major art divisions that art types are closely related to the means and materials artists employ and art learning normally begins with familiarizing oneself with the tools and materials involved. Take painting for instance. Before producing creative works with oil paints, one has to first learn the characteristics of oil pigments on the canvas and the tools and materials to use, such as the brushes, paints and palette knives. With Chinese painting, the tools and materials in concern will be the brushes, ink stick, ink stone and paper. To use art performance as an example, the tools and materials a dancer uses are his or her body. Therefore, he or she needs to acquire a full understanding the suppleness of his or her body. From head to toes, only after gaining control of the stretch of each muscle and the limitation of each joint, will the dancer be able to move in perfect harmony with music and exhibit the esthetic of the body to the maximum. When comparing painting and art performance, it is especially obvious that, despite visual presentation is equally valued in both, the former expresses the elemental effects of various materials through use of the brushes and pigments while the latter achieves the same expression by using the human body. On the other hand, when a picture created with a brush is a group of characters, both visual and literary features can be there. Wang Xi-zhi's "Lan Ting Ji Xu," for example, is a masterpiece highly regarded in both Chinese calligraphy and literature (Jiang Xun, 1995a). This

and a comprehensive discussion of the “man—object interaction” becomes necessary. This study, adopts the second approach, accepting the music as an analogy of “creation.” The process of playing a musical instrument is similar to creation of artworks. In addition to the creator’s mental state and inspirations, his interaction with the instrument, his familiarity with the characteristics of the zither, is a prerequisite for him to enhance his musical techniques and his grasp and application of the notes the zither can produce. Consequently, the “creator” is no longer the only focus in the process of music playing.

In a modern commercial society, an artist’s creative process is often imparted with certain mystery about his or her psychological and personal characters as a way to generate exchange value. Some intellectuals, including Su Dong-po, may consider the complexity of the creative process too difficult to describe and choose to acknowledge the existence of the “creative process” but refrain from discussing it or simply pass the subject by giving an insignificant comment. I believe investigation of artistic creation process is to identify how a creator perceives the world and uses the resources in the surroundings to support his or her creation of a unique work, not to emphasize the artist’s monologue about his or her creative concept or the researcher’s analysis and interpretation of any aspect of an artwork. In other words, my attempt is to begin with the “man-object interaction” in the creative process to depict and discuss the possibility of creation through “man-object interaction.”

## 2. Investigation of Literature

Any art discussion has to be about content or form. When discussing the content, it could be like what Tolstoy (Tolstoy, L. G.) (Geng Jizhi [trans.], 1989) said in his “What is Art?” about the relations between creative content and various art concepts or society and culture. When discussing the form, it could be like the analysis by da Vinci (1981) or Kandinsky (1926; Wu Mali [trans.], 1985) of various possible materials and elements in a painting, such as the points, lines and planes, composition, human figure proportions, light, shadow, color, perspective, etc. This paper will discuss neither content nor form. Instead, under the question of how artistic activity takes place, it will, starting from this chapter, examine the man-object interaction and define the mediums referred to in this study.

open-ended interaction with the artist to discuss these questions. There were three phases in the case study to be discussed—the early period (motivation and concept), the middle period (elements and materials) and the last period (post-creation work).

*Keywords:* *Mediums, materiality, creation, illustration*

## 1. Question and Motive

How does an artist come up with a creative work out of nothing? In the past few decades the focus has been on the “creator”—sometimes to examine the life experience of the artist in search of an answer to the “mysterious” and “ineffable” process of artistic creation and sometimes to stress the importance in analysis of “creative works”, studying their creative elements and historic, social and cultural properties, to interpret their meanings. However, is it really impossible to put down in words the mystery and loftiness in the “creative process?” Or, to be more precise, are there no other approaches, other than through the artist’s life experience or analysis of the elements of creative works, to understand the mysteriousness of “creation”? In other words, how does creation take place?

Song Dynasty poet Su Dong-po once talked about creation in a subtle way in his poem “Zither”: “If it’s the zither that makes the music, how come we hear nothing when it’s in its case? If it’s the fingers that produce the sound, why can’t we just listen to your fingers?” Contemporaries often apply the interpretation of this poem on discussion and judgment of matters, to signify that errors in unilateral comprehension are common and the two criticisms—that the zither makes the music and the fingers produce the sound—are restricted and inapplicable in real situations. We are all aware that the beautiful melody is a result of human fingers picking the zither strings; both the fingers and the instrument are essential.

When stretched to touch upon the question of this study: “How does creation take place,” then how do we establish that Su Dong-po’s statement in “Zither” has its enlightening function? There are two possible arguments: One is to regard sound making as an object and my concern will be the physical study of “How sound is produced?” The other is to look at the sound of the zither as a metaphor for the question to be examined

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