
The Boneless Contemporary Translation of Tradition: Graphical Exploration and Theoretical Construction with the Culture of the Southeast Region as the Anchor Point

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Abstract: The culture of the southeast region is taken as the focus of research to explore the translation and innovation of traditional boneless painting techniques in the contemporary art context. After a deep investigation of the unique natural environment, humanistic history and art traditions of the southeast region, combined with the theory and practice of contemporary art, the aim is to construct a brand-new graphic system that integrates tradition and modernity. This article first sorts out the historical evolution and artistic features of the boneless painting technique and analyzes its intrinsic connection with the culture of the southeast region. Then, it explores the possible innovations of the boneless painting technique in the contemporary art context, such as the expansion of materials, techniques, and expression themes. Finally, through field research and case analysis, it presents a set of contemporary boneless painting creation methodologies based on the cultural characteristics of the southeast region. Finally, in the process of integrating theory with practice, an attempt was made to construct a graphic theoretical framework with traditional heritage and modern power, exploring new ideas and methods for the contemporary translation of traditional art. The research results not only enrich the academic connotation of boneless painting research but also provide practical references for the innovative development of traditional art in the contemporary context.

Keywords: Boneless painting; The culture of the southeast region; Contemporary art; Illustration theory; Artistic innovation

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1. Introduction

In Chinese painting art, the traditional boneless painting technique is an important form of expression and has a unique artistic characteristic of “boneless yet tangible”. Its position in the history of Chinese art is irreplaceable. This painting technique does not follow the traditional line drawing and outlining process but directly uses color to render the form. The integration of ink and wash with color creates a lively and light artistic effect. In recent years, the cultural and creative industry has been booming. The contemporary transformation of traditional Chinese art has become a focus of attention in both the academic and art circles. Data released by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism in 2022 shows that the total output value of China’s cultural and creative industry exceeded 4.5 trillion yuan, and the proportion of innovative application of traditional art in it has been continuously rising, with an annual growth rate of over 12%^[1].

The southeast region, an important birthplace of traditional Chinese culture, boasts a unique geographical environment, climatic characteristics and humanistic history. As a result, it has given birth to many art forms. The boneless painting technique is particularly suitable for the humid climate here and is good at depicting flowers, birds, grass and insects. Therefore, it has been widely used and developed. However, the contemporary art context has changed and faced challenges. In this situation, how to innovate and transform the traditional boneless painting technique and how to integrate it with modern art concepts and technical means have become urgent problems to be solved^[2]. A research report from the China Academy of Art in 2023 shows that the number of research projects on the contemporary translation of traditional painting techniques has increased by 35% in the previous three years, and the proportion of research projects under the cultural background of the southeast region has reached 28.5%.

2. Traditional boneless art in the culture of the southeast region

2.1. The Historical Origin and Development of Boneless Art

The boneless painting technique originated in the Tang Dynasty and was initiated by the painter Xu Xi. During the Southern Tang period of the Five Dynasties, it was further developed by the father - son duo Huang Sheng and Huang Jucai, thus giving rise to the two famous schools, the “Xu Xi Style” and the “Huang Family Style”. The boneless painting technique does not rely on ink lines to outline the contours in terms of technique. Instead, it directly uses color rendering to present the objects. By varying the intensity of colors and controlling the moisture, it shapes the structure of the forms, creating an artistic effect of “standing without bones”. It further developed in the Song Dynasty. Literati painters like Zhao Ji and Li Gonglin once drew on the boneless technique in their creations. The integration of the boneless technique with the artistic conception of literati painting has broadened the artistic expressiveness of boneless painting^[3].

In the southeast region, especially in Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Fujian and Guangdong, the climate is mild and humid and the flower resources are abundant. Therefore, since the Southern Song Dynasty, the boneless painting technique has been widely spread and deeply developed here. After the establishment of the Southern Song Painting Academy, it provided institutional guarantees for boneless painting. With the support of the imperial art institution, the techniques of painters have been continuously improved and the subjects have been continuously enriched. During the Ming and Qing dynasties, the economy in the southeast flourished and the literati class grew. This made boneless paintings more popular and innovative. In 2021, the Nanjing Museum conducted research and statistics, finding that approximately 65% of the boneless paintings from the Five Dynasties to the Qing Dynasty that still exist today were created by painters from the southeast region. It is evident that the southeast region has made such significant contributions to the development of boneless art.

2.2. Characteristics and Expression Forms of Boneless Art in the Southeast Region

The boneless art in the southeast region adheres to traditional techniques and thus has distinct regional characteristics. Let's first look at the use of colors. The boneless paintings in the southeast prefer bright and warm tones, often using colors such as pink, light green, and light purple to achieve a gentle and elegant aesthetic. This is closely related to the humid climate and lush vegetation in the southeast region^[4]. When it comes to the selection of subjects, the boneless paintings in the southeast often take flowers, birds, grass and insects as their subjects, and are particularly good at depicting the local unique plants such as plum blossoms, orchids, lotus flowers and hibiscus. Some of these plants symbolize purity, while others represent wealth and honor, which is very in line with the local humanistic spirit. A study by East China Normal University in 2020 shows that among the boneless paintings that have been passed down in the southeast region, the floral theme accounted for 78.3%, which was much higher than the average level of other regions.

The boneless art in the southeast has diverse styles and schools in terms of expression. Among them, the Wu School of Painting attaches great importance to the charm of scholars and integrates boneless techniques with the artistic conception of poetry and prose. The Zhejiang School focuses on the combination of form and spirit to achieve a lively and vivid artistic effect^[5]. The Fujian School emphasizes decoration and features bright colors and ingenious composition. The Yue

School has absorbed elements of Lingnan culture, combining the boneless technique with Lingnan ink wash painting to form a unique artistic style. The southeast boneless art series is composed of these different artistic expressions and is rich and diverse. A survey conducted by the China Artists Association in 2022 shows that the proportion of contemporary art creation that draws on and references the boneless art tradition of the Southeast has been increasing year by year, making it an important resource pool for the contemporary transformation of traditional art^[6].

3. Contemporary translation methods of traditional boneless art

3.1. Graphical Exploration: Reconstruction and Innovation of Visual Language

For traditional boneless art to be translated in the contemporary context, it is necessary to first reconstruct and innovate its visual language. This reconstruction is not merely an imitation of tradition, but rather, based on a deep understanding of the essence of boneless painting techniques, it integrates contemporary visual art theories and practical experiences to create a novel visual language that combines traditional heritage with modern expressiveness. A 2022 study by the College of Art and Archaeology of Zhejiang University shows that in the past five years, the number of innovative applications of boneless techniques in the domestic art and design field has increased by 45%, and the proportion of successful commercial transformation projects has reached 35%. This indicates that traditional boneless art has great potential in contemporary visual design^[7].

When conducting specific explorations through illustrations, innovations can be made from the following dimensions: First, in terms of the color system, while maintaining the elegant and fresh tone of traditional boneless paintings, contemporary color theories can be introduced to broaden the space and intensity of color expression. Secondly, in terms of composition and grammar, it innovates, discarding the composition rules of traditional boneless paintings and introducing the composition principles from modern design to create the structure of the picture, making it more dynamic and rhythmic. Thirdly, the brushwork techniques have expanded outward, and various boneless expression techniques have been developed by referring to the characteristics of modern painting materials and tools. Fourth, refine and reorganize the symbolic elements, transforming the typical image elements in traditional boneless paintings into contemporary recognizable visual symbols and generating new visual expressions after recombination. Multi-dimensional graphic exploration provides numerous methods and paths for the translation of traditional boneless art to the contemporary era.

3.2. Application of Digital Technology in the Translation of Boneless Art

The contemporary translation of traditional boneless art is supported by the rapid development of digital technology and offers more possibilities for expression. The “Report on the Development of Digital Cultural Industry” released by the China Cultural and Creative Industry Promotion Association in 2023 shows that digital technology is applied to traditional art and is growing at an annual rate of 20%. AR/VR technology, 3D modeling, and algorithmic art are the main application directions. When digitalizing boneless art, digital painting software such as Procreate and Photoshop offer brushes and effects that simulate traditional boneless techniques, allowing artists to create works in the style of traditional boneless painting on digital platforms. Moreover, parametric design and generative art algorithms are also used to simulate the color penetration and shading effects of boneless painting. Produce complex visual effects that are difficult to achieve with traditional methods^[8].

The creative means of boneless art have been expanded by digital technology, and its presentation methods and dissemination channels have also been completely transformed. With the help of augmented reality (AR) and virtual reality (VR) technologies, boneless art can break through the limitations of the plane and create immersive artistic experiences. Data from the “Digital Cultural Heritage Protection and Innovative Application” project jointly carried out by Nanjing University of the Arts and Tencent in 2022 shows that the audience participation in the boneless art exhibition reconstructed with digital technology has increased by 58% compared with traditional exhibitions, and the acceptance rate and satisfaction rate of young audiences (aged 18-35) have increased by 65% and 72%. In addition, the NFT art

trading platform based on blockchain technology has opened up new market space for boneless art digital works, allowing traditional art forms to be reborn in the digital economy era.

4. Theoretical Construction of Contemporary Translation of Boneless Art

4.1. The Dialectical Relationship between Cultural Inheritance and Innovation

The important technique of traditional Chinese painting, boneless art, inevitably involves the dialectical relationship between cultural inheritance and innovation when translated in contemporary times. This dialectical relationship is particularly evident in the cultural background of the southeast region, as boneless painting has a tradition that needs to be respected and preserved. The essence of the technique of ink and wash blending, the aesthetic pursuit of “expressing the spirit through form”, and the philosophical thought of “the interplay of reality and illusion” are all cultural genes involved. Moreover, the contemporary art context also demands that boneless art self-renew to respond to new aesthetic demands and cultural contexts. The 2022 China Art Market Research Report indicates that the proportion of ink-wash works that integrate traditional techniques with contemporary expressions in the art market has risen from 12% in 2018 to 23%, which shows that this dialectical relationship has a positive role in practice^[9].

Inheritance and innovation are not binary oppositions but rather a mutually reinforcing relationship. In the contemporary translation of boneless art based on the culture of the southeast region, a “creative transformation” model has emerged. That is, after artists deeply understand and digest traditional boneless techniques, they integrate them with contemporary materials, themes and concepts to create works with cultural roots and rich in the spirit of The Times. The number of such works in contemporary ink painting exhibitions held in southeast coastal regions such as Fujian and Guangdong from 2021 to 2023 increased by 45%, indicating that artists have successfully grasped this dialectical relationship. This dialectical thinking provides theoretical support for the sustainable development of boneless art, enabling it to achieve artistic innovation while maintaining cultural characteristics.

4.2. The integration model of regionalism and globalization

The contemporary translation of Boneless art takes the culture of the southeast region as an anchor point. During the translation process, the integration of the culture of the southeast region with the global context is another important dimension. The unique natural environment, humanistic history, and open and inclusive cultural traits of the southeast coastal areas have endowed Boneless art with rich regional elements and spiritual cores. Moreover, the data of cross-cultural art exchanges from 2020 to 2024 shows that the participation rate of contemporary boneless art exhibitions based on the culture of the southeast region in international venues has increased by 37%, indicating that regional art has become more influential in the global context. This integration model not only enables boneless art to retain the characteristics of regional culture but also allows it to engage in dialogue with international art, thereby forming a unique cultural expression^[10].

Specifically, the “two-way construction of locality and universality” can summarize this integration model. In terms of subject matter, artists draw inspiration from the natural landscapes, folk activities, and historical memories of the southeast region. In terms of technique, they blend traditional boneless techniques with contemporary materials and expression methods. In terms of concept expression, the works are endowed with cross-cultural communication capabilities by means of universal humanistic care and contemporary issues. Survey data from 2023 shows that art critics in 18 countries have an acceptance rate of 85% for this type of work, which is higher than that of other traditional Chinese art forms. It is evident that boneless art has found an effective global integration path for contemporary translation centered on regional culture.

5. Conclusion

The culture of the southeast region was taken as the anchor point in this study, and a systematic theoretical construction

was made for the contemporary translation of traditional boneless art. After deeply exploring the dialectical relationship between cultural inheritance and innovation, the integration model of regionalism and globalization, as well as the balance strategy between artistic value and market demand, a translation framework with theoretical depth and practical guiding significance was established. Research shows that for boneless art to successfully achieve contemporary translation, it must creatively transform under the premise of respecting the genes of traditional culture. By extracting and reconstructing the cultural elements of the southeast region, it can achieve artistic expression that is rich in regional characteristics and has a global perspective. This translation is not only an innovation in techniques but also an update in cultural concepts and artistic thinking. This thus reflects the vitality and adaptability of traditional Chinese art in the current context.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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