

Study and Exploration of the Contemporary Style of Flower and Bird Painting-Contemporary Gongbi Painting

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Abstract: In the Chinese classics, the term “Yang” is defined in the Cihai as (1) shape; (2) modeling, where lines depict the form of an object; (3) style. “Shi” is interpreted as (1) a specific ritual or specification; (2) the visual characteristics of an object. When mentioning “style,” it often evokes traditional Chinese styles, such as composition, spatial arrangement, and the interplay of reality and void. In Chinese aesthetics, “style” is more akin to the concept of composition. During my undergraduate and graduate studies, I focused on the study of Chinese flower-and-bird painting. The following analysis and discussion will examine both traditional and contemporary styles of flower-and-bird painting.

Keywords: “Sample”; “Style”; Chinese Aesthetics

Online publication: November 26, 2025

1. Introduction

As a unique visual art form of China, Chinese painting not only captures the beauty of nature but also expresses emotions through imagery. The style presented in the works resonates with viewers and moves them, showcasing the value of painting.

2. The aesthetic of traditional flower-and-bird painting style

In his seminal work *The Beauty of Silence*, Zhu Guangqian posits: “Beauty is an objective reality that requires human perception to be discovered. It is through aesthetic experience that connections are formed, thereby giving rise to aesthetic engagement.^[1]” The evolution of art’s aesthetic sensibilities over time has shaped distinctive national artistic traditions. Chinese painting, as a unique cultural mainstream with profound historical roots, comprises three major branches: landscape, figure, and flower-and-bird. The prototype of flower-and-bird painting predates landscape art. Through centuries of development, it evolved from early totemic motifs into an independent discipline during the Tang Dynasty, with documented records listing approximately 80 master painters (notable figures include Zhang Sengyao, Xue Ji, Han Huang, Bian Luan, Huang Quan, and Xu Xi). While aesthetic orientations persist across eras, they undergo transformations in tandem with the historical progression of flower-and-bird painting.

Throughout the long course of human development, human aesthetics have inspired artists' research and practical exploration, leading to the continuous creation of aesthetic needs from ancient times to the present. The earliest flower-and-bird motifs in China appeared in a totemic manner. The painted pottery unearthed during the Neolithic period already used patterns of flowers, birds, fish, and insects as decorations, indicating that primitive humans had long pursued the beauty of forms. During the Shang and Zhou dynasties, artifacts incorporated dragon motifs, cloud-and-thunder patterns^[1], taotie (a mythical creature) and beast face motifs, and phoenix patterns, imbuing the flower-and-bird totem with a mysterious aura. Early slavery served as a tool of domination. While appreciating aesthetics, the ancients also demonstrated the function of "cultivating moral education and assisting social order," attributing auspicious meanings or warnings to totems. For example, the taotie motif on the square zun of bronze taotie patterns represents the top of the four great fierce beasts, originating from the endless greed of eating until one is stuffed to death, symbolizing insatiable desire. During the Wei, Jin, and Southern and Northern Dynasties, the flower-and-bird style had already taken initial shape, with more vivid and exquisite carvings of the red bird and black turtle, as well as auspicious and rare totems, used for decoration in stone and brick carvings. Early Chinese flower-and-bird paintings existed at a spiritual level, with little exploration of Western painting styles. Starting from the Southern and Northern Dynasties, due to geographical differences, distinct painting styles emerged, leading to the division between the North and the South.

Dong Qichang of the Ming Dynasty proposed the "Northern and Southern Schools of Landscape Painting," though flower-and-bird painting also exhibited distinct regional styles. Chinese flower-and-bird painting flourished during the Tang Dynasty, evolving from meticulous brushwork to freehand expression. The Tang era's prosperity fostered artistic diversity, with flower-and-bird painting emerging as an independent discipline. Artists prioritized "likeness" and "authenticity," producing works of unparalleled refinement and vitality. Xue Ji's crane paintings from early Tang were mistakenly hailed as "the ultimate masterpiece" in the "Tang Dynasty Famous Paintings Catalogue". Han Huang's "Five Oxen" from the mid-Tang period remains a timeless masterpiece, now essential for Chinese painting studies. Court painter Bian Luan specialized in floral compositions, excelling in delicate brushwork and color application. His dynamic birds perched on branches sparked a style of imitation. The Five Dynasties period saw the saying "Huang Zong's opulence, Xu Xi's rustic charm," marking the emergence of two distinct styles. Huang Quan, a representative of court flower-and-bird painting, crafted opulent scenes with fine brushwork, while Xu Xi's rustic style was praised as divine by contemporary art critics.

The 300-year Song Dynasty marked the zenith of Chinese flower-and-bird painting. The masterpiece 'Lotus Emerging from Water' (Chushui Furong Tu) presents a solitary lotus blossom through a unique perspective, its emerald-green leaves and ethereal grace radiating timeless charm. This work epitomizes the Southern Song painters' mastery of meticulous realism and their subtle, ethereal aesthetic sensibility^[2]. As critics have noted, 'The beauty of Song paintings lies in their subtle details, embodying a simple, restrained, humble, and gentle artistic ethos—romanticism in adversity, praise in imperfection, and a profound connection to life through figures, landscapes, and flora'^[3].

The above demonstrates how traditional Chinese painting meticulously pursues excellence in line styles, color schemes, and subject matter. From early pottery patterns to bronze vessel designs, these reflect the aesthetic sensibilities of the Chinese nation. The "bone method" (a brush technique principle from Xie He's "Ancient Painting Critique", the second of the Six Principles) guides traditional flower-and-bird painting lines to achieve dual aesthetics^[4] of "substance" and "power." The "substance" aspect requires rigorous form, where lines must be robust and dynamic, as if leaping off the paper. The "power" aspect, as stated in calligraphy theory: "Those skilled in brushwork possess strength, while those lacking it appear soft," meaning works with strong brushwork exhibit vigor, while those lacking it appear weak, resulting in uninspired works. Sharing the same origin as calligraphy, Chinese painting similarly prioritizes lines. Traditional Chinese painters emphasize the strength and vigor of outlines, the fluidity of lines, and their transitions. In color application, they follow the principle of "coloring according to nature," applying hues based on the object's natural growth patterns and colors to faithfully reproduce the subject. Early Chinese painting's color system originated from political ideals. Confucius' "Analects" mentions: "A gentleman does not adorn himself with purple or crimson, nor does he wear

red and purple as vulgar clothing,” signifying that red is the noble color, symbolizing hierarchy and ethical guidance. In subject matter, paintings reflect societal constraints, favoring natural landscapes and leisurely expressions. Artists cherished natural scenery, focusing on ink and brushwork, often employing branch motifs and corner compositions to emphasize philosophical and literary cultivation, pursuing inner spiritual qualities through sensibility.

3. The aesthetic of contemporary flower-and-bird painting style

The beginning of 20th-century contemporary painting marked a sign of transformation and an era of abundant talents. Amid social turmoil, the early years of the new China witnessed national calamities and people’s suffering, from the Opium War to the signing of humiliating treaties by the Eight-Nation Alliance, unprecedented failures made China no longer possess the mentality of a “great nation” striving for the former glory of “all nations paying homage.” The hope was to survive and develop in global competition to change the existing situation. Western culture and ideas surged like tides, prompting China’s modern era to experience “blindingly complex and rapid changes in thought.” Some enlightened individuals in China recognized the gap between Western advanced military and economic systems and China’s backwardness. Visionary cultural pioneers continuously explored and boldly proposed reforms, and the path of painting was deeply influenced by Western art trends, entering a phase of practical innovation. The “Shanghai School” and “Lingnan School” of flower-and-bird painting emerged. The “Shanghai School” was primarily composed of Jiaxing painters, with Ren Yi, Xu Gu, Wu Changshuo, and Pu Hua known as the “Four Masters of the Shanghai School,” while Zhang Xiong and Zhu Xiong, along with Ren Xiong, were collectively called the “Three Xions of Shanghai.” In art education, Mr. Cai Yuanpei advocated the slogan of “saving the nation through aesthetic education,” delivering spiritual culture to society through aesthetic education. He also established the Hangzhou Art College, where Pan Tianshou, as a leading figure in flower-and-bird painting, taught, nurturing a group of influential artists like Wu Guanzhong. Western painting schools also catalyzed the ideological transformation of Chinese painters. Lin Fengmian, Xu Beihong, Guan Yuliang, and others, while preserving the style and spirit of traditional Chinese painting, incorporated the trends of painting composition.

The innovation and reform of Chinese painting styles have been a subject of debate from ancient times to the present. In ancient times, Shi Tao wrote in his “Postscript to the Poem on Painting by Dadi Zi”: “Brush and ink should follow the times, just as the style of poetry and prose changes.” In modern times, Mr. Huang Binhong proposed that “Chinese painting shares many similarities with Western painting,” and that “with brush and ink, one should follow the natural flow, achieving both form and spirit, which is the impressionistic abstraction of Western methods.” While preserving the essence of our nation, we should innovate and expand, keeping pace with the times, showcasing the national spirit^[5,6], and absorbing the strengths of other foreign painting arts. In a small number of flower-and-bird paintings, the pursuit of formal beauty should be abandoned, and instead, the spirit and^[7,8] charm of flower-and-bird painting should be expressed. The works should advocate for emotional expression and the conveyance of subjective feelings. Xu Beihong, the founder of modern art, published “On the Reform of Chinese Painting” in 1918, which contained many reflections on the reform of Chinese painting styles. He proposed the famous five principles: “Adhere to the best of the ancient methods, continue what is nearly lost, improve what is unsatisfactory, add what is lacking, and integrate what can be adopted from both sides.” He pointed out that in the direction of the times, it is necessary to follow the steps of national rejuvenation, inherit traditional painting, and advocate using Western art to improve the shortcomings of traditional Chinese painting. At the same time, studying and creating new styles is of great significance for the innovation and progress of China in the new era. In his early flower-and-bird paintings, such as “Three Horses,” although he had not studied abroad, he began to adopt a fusion of Chinese and Western styles. On one hand, he used traditional Chinese painting techniques for outlining; on the other hand, he borrowed the painting methods of the popular Shanghai calendar posters of the time, giving the subjects a more three-dimensional feel. This laid the basic framework for the realistic method to reform Chinese painting styles, a concept that permeated his entire creative philosophy.

In the 21st century, modern and contemporary flower-and-bird painting has evolved into a diverse landscape,

with the public's aesthetic preferences undergoing profound transformations. Contemporary painting concepts directly influence stylistic changes, offering new possibilities for Chinese art. The meticulous flower-and-bird genre now embraces conceptual approaches. For instance, painter He Xi's works resemble allegorical narratives, brimming with philosophical wisdom that invites contemplation. His piece "1937, My Home" commemorates the 60th anniversary of the Anti-Fascist War. The chaotic flight of black crows symbolizes the frenzied fascist forces, while the chair represents the homeland of survival. The stark contrast of black, white, and gray tones creates a solemn atmosphere in the artwork.

The works of Lin Ruoxi and Guo Ziliang are imbued with intellectual inquiry and rationality, pursuing decorative beauty. Before putting brush to paper, painter Lin Ruoxi undergoes profound contemplation and arduous exploration: shaping planes, dividing compositions, splashing colors with unrestrained vigor, and outlining lines as subtle as a whisper. Whether slow or swift, he seeks translucent color effects in mineral pigments. A closer look reveals the philosophy, spatial depth, and dialectical thinking in his works—every element is a deliberate composition and meticulous arrangement. From his collected materials and lecture content, it is evident that his art transcends mere realistic depictions of objects. While inheriting traditional forms, he integrates Western abstraction and compositional relationships, pursuing greater self-expression. The interwoven spatial layers and contrasting analogous colors immerse the viewer in a lush green hue.

As can be seen from the above, the contemporary pluralistic society has more abundant thoughts and consciousness, and artists are pioneering and innovating in the study of composition style, line style, color style, material selection, technique exploration and decorative arts, exploring the new style of contemporary flower-and-bird painting.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, traditional flower-and-bird painting embodies the splendor and achievements of history, serving as the foundation of Chinese painting's evolution. The innovative development of contemporary flower-and-bird painting is a product of its time. From traditional to modern painting styles, as a compositional element, are indispensable. As Wu Guanzhong observed in his discourse on stylistic beauty: "Why do Jiangnan towns with black-tiled roofs and white-walled houses attract painters more than skyscrapers? It's not out of admiration for their antiquity, but rather their captivating charm. Beyond the allure of rustic folk customs, the geometric beauty formed by the interplay of white walls and black tiles, their varying densities, is equally mesmerizing." This demonstrates the paramount importance of determining painting styles^[9,10].

As Chinese painting has evolved into a period of comprehensive exploration, generations of artists have persistently examined and sought to decipher the principles governing painting styles. The diversity in styles, materials, media, concepts, and techniques has given rise to new content, ideas, and themes, resulting in distinct artistic expressions^[11,12]. This diversity has also shaped the contemporary trends and popular directions in flower-and-bird painting. Building on earlier research and accumulation, new styles have emerged in recent years. Artists like Lin Ruoxi, Su Baijun, Jiang Hongwei, Han Fei, and Gao Yun, who specialize in meticulous brushwork studies of flower-and-bird painting, have made significant contributions. In today's multicultural environment, exploring stylistic sensibilities holds extraordinary significance.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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