
Exploration of “Flatness and Spatial Reconstruction” in Oil Painting Creation — Taking *School’s Out*, a Work Selected for the 14th National Art Exhibition and Collected by the National Art Museum of China, as an Example

Zha Guo*

School of Art, Xizang University, Lhasa 850000, Xizang, China

*Author to whom correspondence should be addressed.

Copyright: © 2026 Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC BY 4.0), permitting distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is cited.

Abstract: In the era of advanced digital media technology, image technology has been profoundly influenced, leading to the dilemma that artistic modeling faces the mechanical reproduction of images. To explore the contemporary expression of regional theme oil paintings, this study takes the Xizang-themed oil painting *School’s Out* as a practical case. It sorts out the development context of flatness and spatial reconstruction through literature research, compares and analyzes the creative techniques of classic works at home and abroad with image analysis methods, and explores how to construct a visual order in line with contemporary aesthetic trends through the refinement and simplification of geometric figures, the reorganization of spatial structures, and the connection of color relationships, combined with the practice of “flatness and spatial reconstruction” in personal landscape oil painting creation. The research shows that this creative technique can effectively enhance the formal beauty and integrity of the picture, break through the limitations of symbolic expression of Xizang-themed works, construct a visual order with both contemporary aesthetics and spiritual connotations, provide a referenceable practical path for young oil painters, and promote the integration of form innovation and emotional expression in Xizang-themed oil paintings.

Keywords: Flatness; Spatial Reconstruction; Formal Language; Landscape Oil Painting; The 14th National Art Exhibition

Online publication: February 26, 2026

1. Introduction

In the current era of full penetration of image technology, the proliferation of mechanically reproduced images has led many painting creations to fall into the misunderstanding of directly appropriating photos, blurring the essential boundary between artistic modeling and mechanical images, and deviating from the creative goal of art to shape unique aesthetic images^[1]. Faced with this dilemma, the creative technique of “flatness and spatial reconstruction” provides an important path for painting to return to ontological exploration. Especially in the creation of Xizang-themed oil paintings, it can not only break through the constraints of traditional realism but also construct a visual language that fits contemporary aesthetics.

This study takes the Xizang-themed oil painting *School’s Out* — which was selected for the 14th National Art

Exhibition and permanently collected by the National Art Museum of China — as a creative practice case, and conducts a systematic research on flatness and spatial reconstruction in oil painting creation. By sorting out the relevant theoretical context, analyzing the creative techniques of artists and representative works at home and abroad, it summarizes the practical paths and values of this creative technique. Finally, through practical research, it is found that flatness and spatial reconstruction play an important role in contemporary oil painting creation. They not only provide theoretical support and practical basis for young oil painters but also open up new ideas for the contemporary exploration of Xizang-themed oil paintings.

2. Theoretical Overview of Flatness and Spatial Reconstruction

2.1. Overview of Flatness

Flatness is a key concept for modern painting to return to artistic ontology and form an independent language. The American art critic Clement Greenberg first systematically elaborated this theory in his 1960 essay *Modernist Painting*, pointing out that “flatness is the unique and most essential feature of the art of painting”, emphasizing that painting should be distinguished from other art forms and free itself from the dependence on the illusion of three-dimensional space^[2]. Greenberg believed that the development of modern painting is a process of continuously eliminating traditional perspective and volume modeling and strengthening the order of two-dimensional plane. Flatness is not a simple visual flatness, but an ontological conceptual turn of painting, prompting painting to shift from imitating nature to focusing on formal structure, color relationships, and visual order itself. This theory provides core support for the formal innovation of modern painting, elevating flatness from a creative technique to an artistic concept with ontological significance, and also becomes an important basis for formal exploration in contemporary landscape oil painting creation.

2.2. Overview of Spatial Reconstruction

In the wave of reforms in modernist painting, spatial reconstruction is not a simple refutation of traditional linear perspective, but an active breakthrough by artists based on visual experience and spiritual expression^[3]. Cézanne first broke through fixed perspective, reorganizing picture space with geometric structures and multiple viewpoints. Cubism further decomposed and juxtaposed objects, completely weakening the illusion of depth through flatness processing. Spatial reconstruction enables artists to actively disassemble and reorganize natural space according to the needs of formal order and emotional expression, no longer being a passive copy of reality, but becoming an expression carrying artists’ subjective cognition and formal exploration.

On the basis of Cézanne’s geometric exploration of picture structure, Cubism further developed spatial reconstruction into a systematic creative method. In the early practices of Picasso and Braque, objects were disassembled into interpenetrating geometric planes. Through the movement of viewpoints and the division of the picture, visual information from different angles was compressed into the same plane, eliminating the depth illusion of traditional painting and laying a formal foundation for spatial reconstruction^[4]. With the evolution of artistic language, the connotation of spatial reconstruction has been continuously enriched. It is not only a means to get rid of the constraints of realistic spatial logic and a single viewpoint but also a creative method of disassembling, reorganizing, superimposing, and splicing space based on subjective expression, so as to construct an artistic space with formal tension and spiritual connotations.

Nowadays, with the proliferation of images, the significance of spatial reconstruction has become more prominent. It allows landscape oil paintings with regional themes to break through the limitations of realistic representation, and construct a more contemporary visual language through the refinement of geometric figures and formal reorganization, thus gaining unique recognition in current vision. This practice is not only a response to Western modernism but also an important contribution to the localized exploration of contemporary Chinese oil painting.

3. Analysis of Creative Techniques in Classic Works at Home and Abroad

In the historical development of Chinese and foreign art, the artistic expression of flatness and spatial reconstruction has rich practical exploration experience. Among them, Western modernist artists have built a formal framework for this expression technique, while contemporary domestic artists, rooted in their own aesthetic accumulation and regional characteristics, have explored unique expression paths combined with traditional Chinese painting, providing diverse practical references for the localized creation of contemporary oil painting. The specific analysis is as follows:

In Western painting art, Paul Cézanne's *Apples and Oranges* (**Figure 1**) has become an important practical model for the exploration of flatness in modern painting. Instead of deliberately weakening the sense of space of objects, he focused on the ontology of the picture, condensing the folds of the tablecloth, the volume of fruits, and the layers of the background into geometric forms. By weakening the light and shadow gradient of linear perspective, he sorted out the still life scene with original three-dimensional depth into a combination of planes that fit the two-dimensional plane of the canvas, making the spatial relationship of the picture subject to the overall formal order rather than a passive copy of real space. This creative idea of transforming natural space into the plane form of the picture laid the core principle of "subjective sorting and form priority" for the flatness technique^[5]; Paul Gauguin's *Moon and the Madonna* (**Figure 2**) abandoned the detailed description of realistic painting, constructing the picture with flat color blocks and simplified modeling, deliberately weakening spatial layers and highlighting strong decorative flatness characteristics; Henri Matisse's *Harmony in Red* (**Figure 3**) pushed this decorative flat expression to the extreme, creating a pure planar visual effect with smooth lines and large-area flat colors; Pablo Picasso's *Girl with a Mandolin* (**Figure 4**) disassembled figures and musical instruments into geometric planes, integrated the visual characteristics of multiple viewpoints, arranged and reorganized the picture in a scattered manner, broke the logic of a single viewpoint, and endowed objects with new visual forms through subjective spatial construction. Georges Braque's *Landscape at L'Estaque* (**Figure 5**) geometrized landscape elements, reconstructed space through the interlacing and splicing of planes, and strengthened the planar attribute with low-saturation colors, providing a feasible practical path for the spatial reconstruction of landscape themes; David Hockney's *A Bigger Grand Canyon* (**Figure 6**) combined modern visual experience to reconstruct picture space with a collage-like technique, breaking the limitation of a single viewpoint, allowing the picture to retain a flat formal sense while presenting a multi-dimensional visual experience, expanding more possibilities for the contemporary expression of this technique.



Figure 1. Paul Cézanne, *Apples and Oranges*, 1899—1900, 73 cm × 92 cm, Collection of Musée d'Orsay, Paris, France



Figure 2. Paul Gauguin, *Moon and the Madonna*, 1899, 96×75 cm

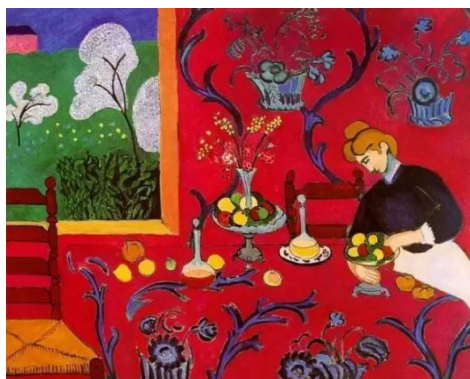


Figure 3. Henri Matisse, *The Red Studio*, 1908, 180cm × 220 cm, Collection of State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, Russia



Figure 4. Pablo Picasso, *Girl with a Mandolin*, 1910, 100.3 cm × 73.6 cm, Collection of Museum of Modern Art, New York, USA



Figure 5. Georges Braque, *Landscape at L'Estaque*, 1908, 73 cm × 60 cm, Collection of Kunstmuseum Basel, Switzerland



Figure 6. David Hockney, *A Bigger Grand Canyon*, 1998, 121.9 cm × 91.4 cm

The exploration of flatness and space in Chinese painting art has long formed a unique Oriental system. Gu Kaizhi's *Nymph of the Luo River* (**Figure 7**) in the Eastern Jin Dynasty, as an early model of spatial consciousness and planar expression in the history of Chinese painting, integrated plot scenes from different time and space into the same picture through the long scroll format and the spatial organization of “shifting viewpoints with steps”. The work modeled with lines, weakened the three-dimensional light and shadow of objects, and constructed layers through the arrangement of positions and the rhythm of density, forming a non-deep planar space. This method of reorganizing visual space according to narrative and emotional needs echoes the painting concept in Zong Bing's *Preface to Landscape Painting*^[6], laying an important foundation for the spatial expression paradigm of traditional Chinese painting. In his work *Water Town in the South of the Yangtze River* (**Figure 8**), contemporary artist Wu Guanzhong integrated the essence of Chinese and Western art, combining the scattered perspective of traditional Chinese painting with Western formal language, weakening the spatial depth of realistic painting, and expressing the beautiful scenery of the south of the Yangtze River through the planar composition of points, lines, and planes, making the picture have both formal beauty and Oriental artistic conception, and realizing the localized transformation of Western modern formal language; the comic strip *Bangjin Meiduo* (**Figure 9**) by Xizang artist Han Shuli is deeply influenced by Xizang's unique culture, combining Xizang's elements with the techniques of flatness and spatial reconstruction. It flattens and patterns the shapes of Xizang's figures and Xizang's black tents, breaks the time and space limitations of reality, subjectively processes the objective objects in the picture, and completes spatial reconstruction in planar visual expression^[7], making the picture not only full of strong Xizang's national characteristics but also having the formal expression of modern art, providing a precious local reference for the artistic creation of Xizang's themes.



Figure 7. Gu Kaizhi, Nymph of the Luo River, Eastern Jin Dynasty, 27.1 cm × 572.8 cm, Silk painting with color, Collection of The Palace Museum, Beijing](Note: Image placeholder)



Figure 8. Wu Guanzhong, *Water Towns in the South of the Yangtze River*, 1997, 148 cm × 148 cm, Collection of National Art Museum of China

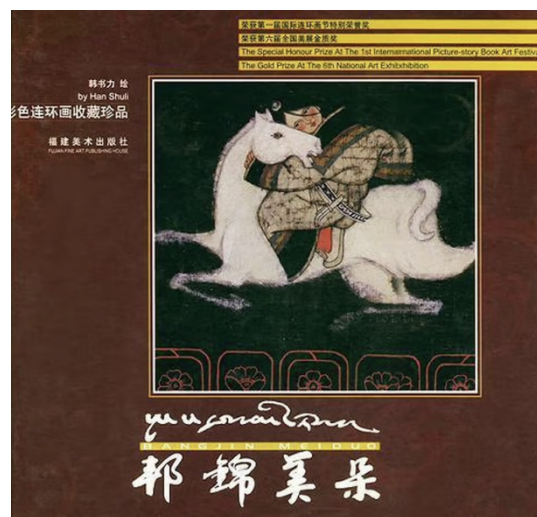


Figure 9. Han Shuli, *Bangjin Meiduo*, a complete set of 12 paintings, each with a size of about 26 cm × 26 cm, Collection of National Art Museum of China

4. Practical Exploration of Flatness and Spatial Reconstruction in School's Out

This study takes the Xizang-themed oil painting *School's Out* — selected for the 14th National Art Exhibition and collected by the National Art Museum of China — as a case to conduct a systematic research on flatness and spatial reconstruction. By sorting out the theoretical context, analyzing the creations of Chinese and foreign artists, disassembling creative techniques, and summarizing and elaborating on its practical value in personal practice paths, it has positive reference significance for contemporary oil painting creation, can provide practical ideas for young creators, and offer a reference for the creation of Xizang-themed oil paintings. *School's Out* integrates personal life experience, Xizang's local scenes with the above two creative techniques, and transforms the gratitude and memory of his father into perceptible visual narration through diverse painting languages such as geometric figure refinement, subjective spatial reconstruction, and color emotional expression. The selection and collection of the work are not only an affirmation of the author's formal exploration of regional oil paintings but also a successful practice of connecting modern artistic techniques with personal emotions.

4.1. Refinement of Geometric Figures

In painting creation, composition is the form structure inferred from the picture. The ability to shape forms and observe

figures is a necessary condition for composition, and this ability requires the artist's own accomplishment. In the simplification and refinement of geometric figures in *School's Out*, it follows a progressive creative thinking process from regularity to breakthrough, building the foundation of the picture with a rational geometric logic, and then breaking monotony and creating a sense of rhythm with differentiated figure shapes, making geometric figures the carrier of picture space and emotional expression. First, taking the rectangular canvas as the base, combined with the shape characteristics of the canvas and the picture content, the sky, ground, and the central theme scene are respectively processed into three parallel and extended rectangles, echoing the canvas shape while eliminating cumbersome details of objects, creating a stable and broad planar visual effect. To break the excessive regularity and visual monotony brought by the three parallel rectangles, I added six standing figures in the ground area, including school children and parents picking them up. The vertical line shape of the six figures forms a distinct visual contrast with the horizontal lines of the rectangles, breaking the shackles of the horizontal composition. By integrating abstract elements of horizontal, vertical, and diagonal lines into the expression of figurative painting, the picture retains the figurative nature of life while adding abstract formal beauty, making the picture layers more abundant and the content more diverse; and adding motorcycles with circular wheels in front of the buildings, as well as small-area circular figures mainly based on the wheels of the father riding a bicycle. The soft curves of the circular wheels form a strong visual contrast with the rigid straight lines of the rectangles, further breaking the regularity of the picture. It not only enriches the geometric composition of the picture through the intervention of circular figures but also stabilizes the overall balance of the picture, making the picture form a simple and tense visual order in planar expression.

4.2. Reorganization of Spatial Structure

The oil painting *School's Out* breaks the spatial logic of traditional linear perspective, reconstructs the space of the real school road from a subjective perspective, eliminates the depth sense of objective space, compresses all the spatial layers in memory into the same plane. The creative steps are consistent with the refinement of geometric figures, advancing layer by layer to complete the subjective construction of space. First, continuing the creative idea of geometric figure refinement, taking the rectangular canvas as the base, three parallel rectangular geometric forms of sky, ground, and central scenery are constructed, making the picture form a unified planar visual logic from the base to the spatial framework; second, in the shaping of the central scenery, breaking the regional limitations of real space, artistically collaging and reorganizing buildings with Xizang's local characteristics from different locations. Combined with on-site investigation and sketching, using a multi-view creative method, local buildings are freed from the constraints of objective reality and become emotional expressions serving the picture composition and theme. At the same time, it takes into account the construction of both explicit and implicit spatial structures of the work to enrich the layers and tension of the planar space; the explicit part is the intuitively visible visual content in the picture; the implicit part is the structure of invisible geometric figures and abstract elements in the picture. Relying on the interweaving and staggered arrangement of horizontal, vertical, and diagonal lines, combined with the control of the spatial rhythm of "dense top and loose bottom", the invisible division and organic connection of the picture space are completed, becoming the internal skeleton supporting the entire planar space. In the conception of figure layout, it always centers on the theme of *School's Out*, with the emotional expression between the author and his father as the core foothold. To make this emotion and theme more visually tense, six standing children and parents are specially set, matched with the dynamic image of the father riding a bicycle. Through the arrangement and dynamic combination of figures, the theme of the picture is accurately highlighted, making emotional expression and theme presentation blend with each other. Finally, the reconstructed planar space not only retains a simple and broad formal beauty but also accurately creates the life artistic conception of *School's Out*, with strong emotional tension, making this subjective space divorced from physical reality a spiritual memory space dedicated to the author and his father, carrying the warm memories of childhood.

4.3. Connection of Color Relationships

In the construction of color relationships, the work advances with two clear creative steps, consistent with the creative logic of geometric figure refinement and spatial structure reorganization, making color the aesthetic effect of carrying personal emotions and connecting the picture vision. At the same time, it integrates the color concept of different hues with the same lightness in the creation, taking into account both emotional expression and visual layers. Step 1: Establish a gray tone as the overall main tone of the picture, abandoning the traditional bright tones of Xizang-themed works. This choice comes from the author's true inner feelings, not only expressing the heartache of watching his father grow old, but also fitting the life background of the childhood school road, making gratitude and empathy for his father the key elements of color expression. Step 2: Complete the overall construction of the picture color by means of flat color block connection. Under the color framework of different hues with the same lightness, the white walls of Xizang-style buildings, the sky, and the color blocks of the ground are each coherent and unified. At the same time, the red roofs of the buildings, green windows, and wall color blocks are connected to each other. The color blocks in each area are connected and related as a whole by flat coating, which not only strengthens the planar visual effect of the picture but also organically connects the scattered visual units through color, making the emotional expression of the gray tone more integrated, and making the theme atmosphere of *School's Out* more infectious in a harmonious color rhythm.

4.4. Expression of Painting Language

In the creation of *School's Out*, from the base processing to the final presentation, the author always makes the painting language serve the overall idea of flatness and spatial reconstruction, and integrates the emotion for his father and the perception of Xizang's local life into every brushstroke and texture. First, I primed the canvas with acrylic paint to make the background more solid, laying a good foundation for the subsequent color laying and material shaping. Faced with the expression of Xizang-style buildings, I first disassembled the local architectural forms from different villages, drew dozens of sketches of their shapes, and deliberated their positional relationships in the picture. After the composition was determined, combined with the geometric framework, I applied the color blocks in flat coating, connecting the colors and the structure of the picture into a whole. To restore the real texture of Xizang-style buildings eroded by plateau wind, rain, and sunshine over the years, I mixed fine sand and coarse sand into oil paint and applied it to the picture, making the roughness of the walls directly visible; for the places where the old paint on the Xizang-style gates fell off, exposing the metal underneath, I piled gold foil and silver foil little by little to simulate the mottled effect polished by time; for the rain and weathering traces on the walls, I let the paint flow naturally with turpentine, then scraped out the texture with a palette knife and self-made tools, making the peeling feeling of the walls more natural.

In terms of brushwork, the author deliberately did not use the detailed description of realism, but quickly outlined the forms with semi-freehand brushwork. This not only avoids the rigidity of photos but also makes the brushwork more in line with the overall expression of flatness. For example, when painting figures, I did not dwell on the details of facial features, but captured the dynamics with concise lines; when painting buildings, I used a palette knife to press out the sense of planes, strengthening the characteristics of geometric composition. Throughout the process, the weight of each brushstroke and the virtuality and reality of the texture echo the emotions and forms of the picture, making the planar expression not only a visual structure but also a carrier of conveying memories and temperature.



Figure 10. Guo Zha, *School's Out*, 2024, 205×125cm, Selected for the 14th National Art Exhibition, Collection of National Art Museum of China

5. Practical Value and Enlightenment of Flatness and Spatial Reconstruction

The creative practice of *School's Out* not only verifies the personal practical value of “flatness and spatial reconstruction” in creation, breaking out of the dilemma of Xizang-themed oil paintings relying on objective realism, integrating personal emotions with Xizang’s local characteristics, but also confirms the feasibility of this technique in personal oil painting creation from the essence of creation. Through geometric refinement and spatial reorganization, the daily school scene is transformed into a visual narrative with contemporary formal beauty and spiritual artistic conception, thereby triggering attention to the formal language in the creation of regional theme oil paintings. It further profoundly confirms that flatness and spatial reconstruction are not simple formal techniques, but the creative results of the author deeply learning from the creative experience of previous artists and repeatedly verifying through practice.

In the current era of image proliferation and visual convergence, this kind of creative thinking has become a necessary and forward-looking expression method for oil painting creation. It not only helps various themes break through the inherent limitations of realistic representation and construct a unique contemporary visual logic but also provides clear guidance for creators. It is necessary to actively incorporate this kind of expression thinking into the creative system to reconstruct the internal connection between picture texture and emotion. For personal creation, the expression logic constructed by this practice allows personal emotions to take root in the regional soil and conform to the laws of contemporary aesthetics, avoiding the emptiness and homogenization of creation, and making the works radiate the vitality of the times under the influence of local culture. It provides a referenceable practical reference based on the practical value in personal oil painting creation and contributes modestly to the creation of regional oil paintings.

6. Conclusion

In the current era of increasingly diversified artistic expression, technological innovation and media expansion are

constantly reshaping the boundaries of oil painting creation. The traditional path of simply copying objects can no longer bear the aesthetic demands of contemporary art. How to balance formal exploration and spiritual artistic conception expression in creation has become a subject worthy of in-depth study by every oil painter.

On the path of exploring flatness and spatial reconstruction with *School's Out* as a practical case, the author once fell into difficulties due to the choice of picture language, and also had the spirit of exploration to break through the constraints of realism and find a painting language belonging to his own expression. This creative process not only gave the author a deeper understanding of the condensation and reorganization of picture forms but also explored a feasible path of integrating personal emotions and regional characteristics into formal language, accumulating practical theoretical and practical experience for his own creation.

Nowadays, the soil for literary and artistic creation is becoming more fertile. The times have given artists unprecedented creative opportunities, and also entrusted us with the responsibility of promoting the healthy development of contemporary art. The exploration of picture forms and spatial expression is endless. In the future, the author will continue to delve into this path, explore more possibilities of oil painting creation in the cycle of deconstruction and reconstruction, and inject vitality and vitality belonging to the present into the creation of regional oil paintings.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

- [1] Shang H, 2022, Introduction to Meaningful Modeling. *Art Panorama*, (02): 139-141.
- [2] Greenberg C, 2019, Modernist Painting (Trans. by Shen Y B). *Oil Painting Art*, (01): 30.
- [3] Zhang XJ, 2020, An Analysis of the Application of Spatial Reconstruction in Contemporary Painting, Sichuan Fine Arts Institute.
- [4] Hu LZ, 2026, On the Inheritance and Reconstruction Between Cézanne's Structuralism and Picasso's Cubism. *Art Documents*, (02): 47-49.
- [5] Chen YY, 2026, Cézanne's Way of Seeing: Gaze, Circumspection, and Bodily Image in Still Life Paintings. *Art Education Research*, (03): 18-20.
- [6] Lyu HY, 2026, The Concept of "Reclining Travel" in Preface to Landscape Painting and Its Influence on the Aesthetic Artistic Conception of Chinese Landscape Painting. *Traditional Chinese Painter*, (01): 76-79.
- [7] Zhao J, 2015, A Study on Han Shuli's Comic Strip Creation, Xizang University.

Publisher's note

Whoice Publishing remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

Appendix:

Creative Process Diagrams

