



Freehand Spirit and Contemporary Watercolor Painting: Inheritance and Breakthrough

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Abstract

Background and Aim: Chinese watercolor painting, a fusion of Western realism and traditional Chinese cultural elements, has evolved over two centuries. Driven by the rich heritage of traditional ink painting and the influence of digital technologies, watercolor artists have sought to develop a unique artistic identity that bridges Eastern aesthetics with modern innovation. Despite progress, theoretical exploration and systematic construction remain underdeveloped, particularly in the digital age. While prior research has extensively documented the historical evolution and regional characteristics of Chinese watercolor painting, relatively little attention has been paid to how this medium is adapting to the era of digital media and interdisciplinary collaboration. Current literature often lacks clear theoretical frameworks that account for the integration of traditional Chinese freehand brushwork with emerging visual technologies such as AR, VR, and digital ceramics. This study explores how traditional Chinese ink techniques can be harmonized with contemporary artistic concepts to preserve cultural essence while expanding expressive possibilities. Specifically, this study investigates two primary research questions: (1) In what ways can the transparency and fluidity of watercolor be effectively integrated with modern artistic techniques without compromising its traditional aesthetic values? (2) How can interdisciplinary approaches, especially involving digital technologies and contemporary design, deepen the artistic expression and cultural relevance of Chinese watercolor painting? This study seeks to bridge this gap by formulating two guiding research questions, as articulated above, to provide a deeper understanding of this evolving art form within the context of Chinese aesthetics and modern innovation.

Materials and Methods: This research adopts a mixed-method approach involving historical analysis, aesthetic evaluation, literature review, and case studies. Historical analysis was conducted using curated archives and catalogues from major Chinese art institutions such as the National Art Museum of China and the Shanghai Art Museum. Key primary sources included artist diaries, published interviews, and retrospective exhibition brochures. Aesthetic evaluation was based on criteria rooted in traditional Chinese art theory—namely “qiyun” (spirit resonance), “xieyi” (freehand expression), and harmony of brush, ink, and void. Evaluations were also informed by comparative visual analysis with Western watercolor works. For the literature review, databases such as CNKI and Google Scholar were searched using keywords like “Chinese watercolor,” “xieyi,” “digital art and tradition,” and “freehand aesthetics.” Inclusion criteria prioritized peer-reviewed papers published between 2000 and 2024. Case studies were selected based on artists’ recognized contributions to the integration of traditional freehand spirit with contemporary techniques. Specifically, the works of Chen Hexi and Fang Min were analyzed for their use of cross-media materials and reinterpretation of traditional ink-based techniques. Each case was evaluated through image analysis, artist statements, and contextual reviews from major exhibitions or publications.

Results: This study identifies the unique characteristics of contemporary Chinese watercolor painting, including its diverse themes, convenient tools, vivid colors, varied techniques, and cross-media applications. These features highlight its adaptability and expressive richness. The research also emphasizes how the freehand brushwork spirit, with its focus on emotional expression and cultural resonance, influences watercolor painting, encouraging artists to prioritize vivid charm and spiritual communication. Furthermore, the development of watercolor painting is explored through regional styles, the emergence of digital watercolor painting, and the integration of Eastern and Western aesthetics. Artists are found to experiment with materials and techniques, blending traditional methods with modern innovation to create works that reflect both cultural heritage and contemporary sensibilities.

Conclusion: In the current context, the development of contemporary Chinese watercolor painting requires painters to further study the use of relevant materials in the creative process, maintaining a creative state that is both intertwined and independent of other painting types. For creators, it is more important to focus on learning and





understanding the language of traditional Chinese culture. At the same time, learning the excellent traditional Chinese humanistic spirit, enhancing aesthetic style and taste, and immersing work creation in a unique Chinese context. It can create a new era of watercolor painting that combines Eastern aesthetic concepts with Western aesthetic tastes. At the same time, the development of contemporary watercolor painting can also drive the common development of other water-based material paintings, especially the development of traditional Chinese ink painting, which is conducive to the inheritance and dissemination of Chinese traditional culture.

Keywords: Chinese Contemporary Watercolor; Freehand Painting; Traditional and Modern Integration

Introduction

Chinese watercolor painting is derived from the combination of Western realism art and traditional Chinese cultural art, and has undergone nearly two hundred years of development in China. Researchers of watercolor painting initially relied entirely on learning Western watercolor painting techniques and educational paradigms, and gradually attempted to explore new development directions for watercolor painting from multiple perspectives. Until now, Chinese watercolor painting has held an important position in Chinese painting art. Many senior Chinese watercolor painters are committed to the study of how to sustain the development of watercolor painting in China, from Li Shutong and Lin Fengmian to Li Tiefu, Wang Zhaomin, Gu Yuan, Li Jianchen, Yang Taiyang, Zhang Chongren, Yang Yunlong, and other artists, as well as Huang Tieshan, Zhuang Hongxing, Liu Xinsheng, Guan Weixing, Wang Weixin, Zhou Gang, Lu Qinglong, Chen Jian, and others. They have all explored their practices and theories in Chinese watercolor painting. We will combine learning from the West, drawing on techniques, and personalized and nationalized artistic innovation ideas (Huang, 2006). The motto of Li Jianchen, known as the "father of Chinese watercolor painting," is: "Inheritance is not limited to the past; innovation is inseparable from the source." He combines Western painting techniques with Eastern scenery and objects to form a unique artistic language. Painter Huang Tieshan proposed: "Gradually establish an independent system for Chinese watercolor painting, strive to create watercolor paintings with Chinese style, national spirit, personal style, and contemporary consciousness, and establish their own values and aesthetic standards for Chinese watercolor painting." Chen Jian, director of the watercolor art committee of the China Artists Association, believes: Creation comes from concepts and consciousness, and only through spiritual infiltration into the material world can artistic expression be diverse and profound, rich in 'nutrition'

With the increasing development of contemporary new media technology, the display of new technologies such as holographic imaging, artificial intelligence (AI), virtual reality (VR), augmented reality (AR), and the gradual prevalence of various art forms such as illustrations, picture books, comics, and intangible cultural heritage artworks, the comprehensive painting elements in watercolor painting art have been continuously enriched, accompanied by the increasing diversity of their forms and expression content, Its visuals have also increasingly presented new aesthetic characteristics of the times and reflected the modern humanistic emotions and artistic cultivation of the public with the passage of time. In the past 20 years, the art of watercolor painting has received increasing attention from society and academia.

At present, relevant research in China includes: tracing the historical origins of watercolor painting and analyzing the current status of painting, providing relevant theoretical basis for modern watercolor art research, such as Yuan Zhenzao (2009), Wang Weixin (2001), etc; Exploring the national character of Chinese watercolor painting creation, highlighting the national aesthetic taste and spiritual connotation of Chinese watercolor painting, such as Tao Shihu (2006), Jiang Yue (2005), Chen Genxiong, & Zhu Hui (2010), Tang Shaowei (2008), etc; Exploring the personalized application of new materials and techniques in watercolor art creation, emphasizing the importance of using new media in watercolor art creation, such as Luo Lin, & Hu Meifang (2012), Shao Yuhao (2014), Lu Xuyan (2014), etc; By analyzing the aesthetic characteristics of watercolor paintings in different regions of China, this paper elaborates on the impact of painters' regional consciousness on the presented cultural landscapes, such as, Li Dejun (2013), Zhuang Lei (2017), Zhang Li, Wang Wenwen (2021), Wang Jie (2014), etc.





Objectives

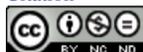
Explore the development of contemporary Chinese watercolor painting in the context of traditional freehand painting, especially in the two key issues of how to combine the natural fluidity of watercolor painting with modern artistic techniques, and how to enhance its artistic depth through interdisciplinary methods. The research aims to promote the advancement of watercolor painting in modern Chinese art, including technical innovation, modern reinterpretation of traditional methods, and interdisciplinary collaboration. And provide theoretical and practical guidance for the future development direction of watercolor painting.

Literature review

At present, relevant research in China includes: tracing the historical origins of watercolor painting and analyzing the current status of painting, providing relevant theoretical basis for modern watercolor art research, such as Yuan Zhenzao (2009), Wang Weixin (2001), etc; Exploring the national character of Chinese watercolor painting creation, highlighting the national aesthetic taste and spiritual connotation of Chinese watercolor painting, such as Tao Shihu (2006), Jiang Yue (2005), Chen Genxiong, & Zhu Hui (2010), Tang Shaowei (2008), etc; Exploring the personalized application of new materials and techniques in watercolor art creation, emphasizing the importance of using new media in watercolor art creation, such as Luo Lin, & Hu Meifang (2012), Shao Yuhao (2014), Lu Xuyan (2014), etc; By analyzing the aesthetic characteristics of watercolor paintings in different regions of China, this paper elaborates on the impact of painters' regional consciousness on the presented cultural landscapes, such as, Li Dejun (2013), Zhuang Lei (2017), Zhang Li, Wang Wenwen (2021), Wang Jie (2014), etc.

At present, there is relatively little research on Chinese watercolor painting abroad. Meanwhile, although there are different directions of research on watercolor painting in China and a large number of textbooks and brochures on watercolor techniques in books and materials, the overall focus is on micro-analysis of specific techniques in the creative process, which is highly practical.

However, in the current era of digital new media, the theoretical sublimation and system construction related to the development of Chinese watercolor painting are insufficient, neglecting the attention and exploration of the evolution of Western contemporary watercolor painting in the new era and lacking in-depth analysis of the combination of watercolor painting art with traditional Chinese freehand brushwork spirit and Western context, which affects the integrity of the social application of watercolor painting.



Conceptual Framework

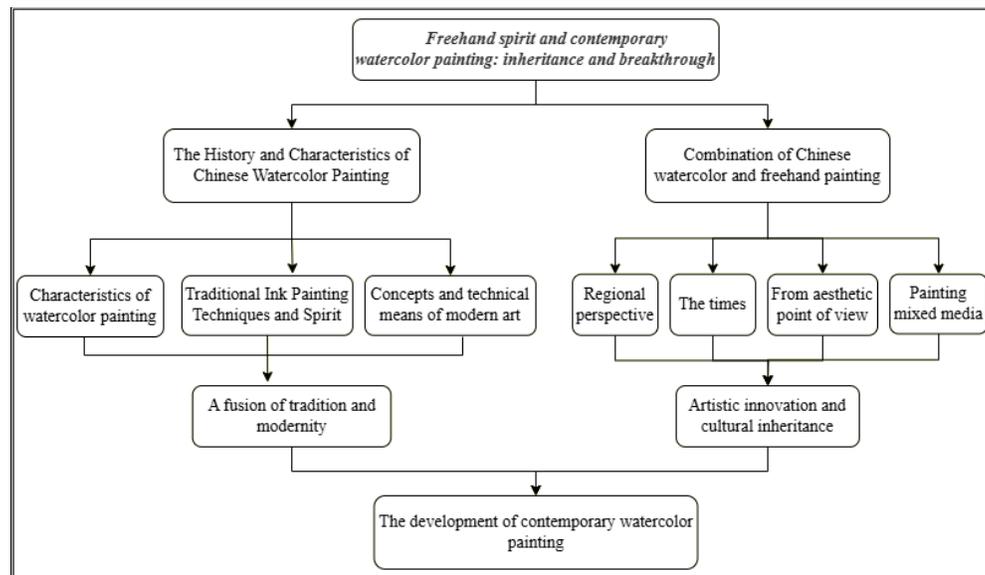


Figure 1 Conceptual Framework

Note: Constructed by the researcher

Figure 1 outlines the conceptual framework that guides this research. It is divided into three layers:

(1) **Traditional Ink Painting Techniques and Spirit:** This includes techniques like brush texture, layering of ink tones, and compositional strategies such as void-filling and symbolic perspective. These components embody the philosophical foundations of Chinese freehand painting—harmony, subtlety, and subjectivity.

(2) **Modern Artistic Concepts and Techniques:** This layer includes the influence of Western watercolor techniques, digital painting tools, AR/VR interaction, and interdisciplinary crossovers with ceramics or fashion design.

(3) **Artistic Expression in Contemporary Watercolor:** The synthesis of the above layers culminates in artworks that are not only technically sophisticated but also culturally rich, preserving the essence of Chinese painting while reaching out to new mediums and audiences.

This diagram emphasizes that tradition and innovation are not binary opposites but interdependent forces shaping contemporary artistic identity.

Methodology

Detail the methods used to study contemporary Chinese watercolor painting, emphasizing historical analysis and aesthetic evaluation. Describe how this paper explores the aesthetic and technical characteristics of Chinese watercolor painting and its adaptation to new media technologies (such as digital art, AR, VR). Includes an explanation of how traditional Chinese ink techniques can be combined with contemporary methods to achieve unique visual effects and creative expressions, and mentions a comparative study of different regional styles and their influence on watercolor techniques. This study uses literature analysis and case study methods to conduct an in-depth analysis of the works and related literature of famous Chinese watercolor painters to understand the development characteristics and artistic expression of Chinese watercolor painting in the freehand style.



Results

1. Characteristics of the contemporary Chinese watercolor painting

Chinese contemporary watercolor painting, with its unique artistic language and expression form, shows the aesthetic concept and cultural connotation of the contemporary Eastern society. Its features include easy use of tools, wide themes, bright colors, diverse performance techniques, and innovative cross-media applications. These characteristics make watercolor painting occupy an important position in the field of Chinese contemporary art and provide a broad space for the future development of art.

A wide range of themes: The contemporary Chinese watercolor painting covers a wide range of themes, easy to be accepted by the public, covering the natural landscape, still life, characters, historical events, and other types. There is both praise for natural landscapes and attention to trivial matters in life; There is both inheritance of traditional culture and reflection on historical events. This diversified theme selection reflects the diversity of social culture and the diversity of public aesthetic taste. At the same time, this is also an important factor in the increasing popularity of watercolor in today's society.

Convenient tools: the tools needed for watercolor painting are simple and light, the drawing paper can be folded and easy to carry, the paint is easy to dry and easy to clean, At the same time, with the development of science and technology, watercolor pigments have various characteristics, such as solid watercolor pigments, precipitable watercolor pigments, and watercolor paper can be divided into coarse grain paper and fine grain paper in different grams, According to the different visual effects required by watercolor painters, they can choose to use different characteristics of pigments and watercolor paper. The continuous update and increase of watercolor painting tools make watercolor painting an ideal choice for painters or watercolor enthusiasts to go out and sketch and create.

Bright colors: The essential feature of watercolor is the combination of "water" and "color," and the use of "water" distinguishes it from the picture expression of oil painting and powder painting, while the proper use of "color" distinguishes it from the traditional Chinese ink painting. Compared with the use of color, traditional Chinese painting, watercolor painting are relatively rich and colorful in color application, emphasizing color contrast and layering, and emphasizing the emotional expression of colors. Painters are good at using colors to create infectious picture effects. "Water" and "color" are the most essential characteristics of excellent watercolor painting. As the famous Chinese painter Wu Guanzhong once said, "Watercolor, water, color, it is characterized by 'water' and 'color' ... it is wonderful in the combination of water and color." It shows that the characteristics of watercolor works are that the watercolor is dense and the color is transparent. Even after the layers of color pressure, under the premise of moderate control of the water, the picture will still present another kind of thick and calm style that is different from the oil painting. The level of style of a work is an important factor that distinguishes "excellent works" from "handicraft."

Diversification of expression techniques: With the development of the forms, contents, materials, and techniques of various types of painting in contemporary China, contemporary Chinese watercolor painting shows a trend of diversified forms in the expression techniques. The painters borrowed from the techniques of Western watercolor painting but also inherited the essence of traditional Chinese ink painting techniques, such as splash-ink, sprinkling, the Cun method, precipitation, and other techniques. The application of these techniques enriches the expressive force and artistic appeal of contemporary Chinese watercolor painting. As an art form, watercolor painting can also express the painter's understanding and reflection on life, society, and oneself through the use of technical elements such as color, lines, and shapes, thereby resonating with the audience. The blending of techniques is not merely technical—it is a form of cultural negotiation. By reactivating the "spirit of freehand" within new technological contexts, Chinese watercolor art positions itself as both a preserver of heritage and a participant in global contemporary dialogues.

Cross media innovative application: As an inclusive art form, contemporary Chinese watercolor painting has surpassed pure paper art expression, Nowadays, its "water-based" and "colorful" properties are often borrowed for the creation of prints, toner paintings, acrylic paintings, comprehensive paintings, oil



paintings, comics, illustrations, animations, picture books, and other art genres, when combined with other media, certain special visual effects can be created. For example, Chen Hexi's work (Figure 2) demonstrates a sophisticated integration of traditional freehand brushwork and modern oil painting methods. In his 2018 piece *Little Roadside*, he manipulates the immiscibility of water and oil to create layered textures that echo the rhythm and spatial abstraction of Chinese ink landscapes. The blurred boundaries and spontaneous forms in his work evoke the concept of "liubai" (intentional blankness), central to xieyi aesthetics. Moreover, his use of diffused color patches instead of precise contours manifests the principle of "意在笔先" (meaning precedes brushstroke), reinforcing the spiritual priority of intention over form. Watercolor can also be combined with the fields of design and decoration. For example, watercolor painting can be applied to book binding, clothing design, interior decoration, and other aspects to provide creative inspiration for designers. For example, applying watercolor colors to ceramic painting is a cross-border artistic breakthrough. Chinese watercolor painter Fang Min created a series of ceramic watercolor paintings in 2018 (Figure 3). His watercolor paintings can be decorated on the surface of daily ceramic products such as ceramic plates and vases. He applied the colors of watercolor painting to ceramic painting, retaining the delicacy and transparency of watercolor painting while facing material incompatibilities (e.g., absorbency and pigment fixatives), but also unlocking new expressive modes. Giving ceramic works more artistic expression. These integrations are interpreted through Nicholas Bourriaud's theory of "relational aesthetics," where art becomes experiential and immersive through new media. Conceptually, Fang's work bridges the temporal and material, transforming static ceramic surfaces into narrative, poetic spaces inspired by Chinese landscape scrolls. His practice embodies the spirit of painting as poetry, where the ceramic body becomes a metaphorical canvas for mood and cultural memory.

Together, these case studies exemplify how contemporary Chinese artists are not merely mixing media but are strategically using new forms to sustain and reinterpret traditional Chinese artistic philosophies.



Figure 2 "Little Roadside" by Chen Hexi in 2018
Note: <https://kknews.cc/zh-my/culture/pqb9vx2.html>



Figure 3 Ceramic watercolor painting by Fang Min in 2019

Note: https://www.sohu.com/a/538360378_121124760

At the same time, art is interconnected, and this cross-media application not only helps to promote communication and innovation in different art fields, but it is also beneficial for international exchanges during the same period. Like the work of Sydney painter Niharika Hukku (Figure 4), such ceramic vases are both practical daily necessities and ornamental works of art. This form of creation provides artists with a new creative platform and allows more people to be exposed to the charm of different art forms.



Figure 4 Ceramic watercolor painting by Niharika Hukku (Sydney) in 2019

Note: <https://www.163.com/dy/article/EKPTNBSI05148NVH.html>

2. Chinese freehand context

According to the literal division in Chinese, 'freehand brushwork' is understood as 'writing imagery', and imagery is an aesthetic orientation in classical Chinese art. It is a spirit of freehand brushwork that runs through and continues throughout Chinese culture and art, and is one of the representative formal beauties of Oriental traditional art.



Freehand brushwork is an intermediate state between realism and abstraction, which is consistent with the aesthetic experience and emotional experience of "specious" and "implication" in traditional Chinese culture. The art that has always been identified as both similar and different is the most artistic attraction. The Chinese traditional calligraphy and painting art, in the public consensus of "nature and humanity" under the traditional culture thought for thousands of years, even in the highly developed contemporary, if art is too realistic, it's no different than a photograph, and if art is completely abstract, it lacks an understandable audience.

"Freehand" is translated into English as "xieyi (写意)". "xie" in Chinese culture can be understood as techniques, writing, description, expression, sustenance, etc.; "yi" can be understood as thought, style, connotation, accomplishment, knowledge, cognition, perception, poetry, image, artistic conception, atmosphere, etc. The combination of "xie" and "yi" is a combination of experience and transcendental experience from a philosophical point of view. In Tong Qingbing's book *Course of Literary Theory: Artistic conception refers to the image system of scene blending and reality presented in lyric works and the aesthetic imagination space it induces and expands.*"

Due to the cultural differences, Western culture emphasizes science and technology, emphasizing the truthful description of the shape, volume and space of objective images, Therefore, reflected in the field of painting is the western painting emphasis on "writing" reality, In contrast, traditional Chinese culture is led by the views of "placing emotions on objects" and "creating with the subject and the object as one." As in Laozi, "The better the music, the more distant and subtle it is; the better the image, the more ethereal and far-reaching it is", so the Chinese painting field emphasizes the spiritual "meaning (Yi)" of communication. The combination of "Xie" and "Yi" breaks the boundaries of a fixed category framework and is not limited to the object image, so that the picture can carry the spatial structure of form and color and the expression of thoughts and emotions at the same time.

Traditional Chinese painting has always had the painter's humanistic freehand brushwork spirit throughout the beginning and end of the work, especially the "ink painting", which can reflect the traditional philosophy of Oriental culture, and the matching Oriental history and culture, religious belief, and ideology. It focuses more on the painter's subjective feelings and emotional expression. In the way of expression is the use of general, exaggerated techniques, rich association, although the pen is simple but the artistic conception is complex, with a certain expression. A complete painting consists of poetry, calligraphy, paintings, printing, "painting in the poem, Poetry in the paintings" is the best portrayal of the Chinese humanistic spirit, Besides, the painter and the audience are in the same context of the Chinese humanistic environment, so it is easy to reach a consensus from the creation of the work to its acceptance and appreciation. The works created in this context guided by the spirit of freehand brushwork do not seek to obtaining a realistic description of a certain objective object and its space, but are based on the basic paradigms of traditional Chinese calligraphy and painting art, such as "the great truth is extremely simple," "the different things seen are described and illustrated according to the shift of place and a certain perspective," "the white is the black," etc. They leave a large area of white space to offer the audience room for imagination. For example, Zhu Da, a painter in the late Ming and early Qing dynasties, painted a fish or a lotus pond without water, but the observers can imagine the image and scene of water in their mind and see the white part of the painting as a scene of fish activity. Another example is Wu Guanzhong's painting (Figure 5) of birds and flowers, in which the image of birds is only an "ink cluster" that looks like birds scattered on a few tree branches in the picture. The picture's composition as a point is interspersed with the tree trunks and branches as line elements. It is not a specific bird that is portrayed in detail here. Nevertheless, an ethereal, ecologically harmonious natural environment, or even a metaphor for a peaceful era, is reflected through the image of the bird.





Figure 5 "Birds Staying on Trees by the Pond" by Wu Guanzhong in 2008

Note: https://www.sohu.com//a/164914118_167976

Being a creature of ideology, Traditional Chinese painting has been created and grown in the freehand context for thousands of years, and has always had a remarkable oriental sentiment and cultural and spiritual pursuit. It requires the painter to "have a well-thought-out plan" about the objective objects before painting, and to have a high ability to refine and summarize the techniques of brush and ink. "Great wisdom appears stupid" and "see the big points through small things" style of brush and ink techniques. Contemporary Chinese painters have always pursued an aesthetic approach that combines brush and ink charm with Eastern artistic conception. Even though ink painting has evolved into this era, its creation fully reflects the cultural inheritance and confidence of the Chinese people. This culture also affects various types of paintings introduced from the West in modern times. Through the integration and re-innovation of their techniques, they will create contemporary new paintings in the context of Chinese cultural freehand brushwork.

3. Development of Chinese contemporary watercolor painting in the context of Chinese freehand brushwork

The development of watercolor painting in China is closely related to the influence of Chinese traditional culture. In both "watercolor painting" and "ink painting", there is a word for "water". "Water" has a strong philosophical significance in the fusion of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism in Chinese culture. For example, Laozi, the founder of Chinese Taoism, said, "The highest good is like water, benefiting all things without competition." This is the highest level of "goodness" in describing a person's moral character and a spiritual manifestation of sacrificing oneself for others. "Nothing in the world is softer or weaker than water, yet nothing is better at overcoming the hard and strong, because nothing can alter it. "Water is the most flexible among all things, but it is also the most flexible and adaptable, metaphorically referring to human resilience. At the same time, although water may seem weak, it can still be" water dripping through the stone ". This is a description of human perseverance, and the aesthetic taste of Chinese people is also closely related to water. Traditional Chinese painting method emphasizes freehand brushwork, while watercolor painting pays more attention to the expression of color and light, and shadow. In China, watercolor painting is gradually combined with traditional ink painting to form a unique style. In the process of creation, contemporary Chinese watercolor painters pay attention to the expression of their own emotions and thoughts, and emphasize the diversity of personalized creation and expression techniques. In the context of freehand, watercolor painters pay more attention to the expression mode of vivid charm, both shape and spirit, to achieve a freer and flexible creative effect.



From the perspective of regional influence, some Chinese scholars have attempted to define the development of Chinese watercolor painting under regional divisions. For example, the distinction between the "Shanghai School," "Canton School," "Hunan-Hubei School," "Lingnan Watercolor," "Lijiang School," and other watercolor works, because of distinct regional characteristics, is made. Differences in raw materials make the subjects used for creation different, such as ethnic minority subjects, local folklore subjects, ancient architecture subjects, etc., which is similar to the investigation of "dialects" in the same context. The diverse climate and cultural ecology between regions impact the content and form of local watercolor works. For instance, watercolor in the south is more "wateriness" and portrays natural scenes with dense clouds and smoke. In contrast, watercolor in the north is heavier and shows humanistic landscapes with magnificent waves.

From the perspective of the times, Today's digital watercolor painting is a product of the new era, which is a type of watercolor painting created using digital technology. It can be created using devices such as computers, tablets, or touch screens, and can also be printed out through a printer. The emergence of digital watercolor painting makes it easier for artists to create and also brings a richer artistic experience to the audience. With the development of digital new media technology. As an emerging art form in the information age, it has high artistic value and a unique artistic charm. It combines the characteristics of traditional watercolor painting with the advantages of digital painting. Through computer technology, painters can make their own works into digital watercolor paintings, and carry out extensive dissemination and communication, which meets the requirements of the current new media visual culture. Digital watercolor painting is painted on the computer, with higher flexibility and editability. Through the computer drawing software, artists can easily adjust the colors, shades, lines, etc., thus making the work more expressive and visually impact. Integrating the artistic features of the virtual image world, human aesthetics, and the pictorial nature of hand drawn works, such a unique artistic charm and creative way for the creation and development of professional watercolor painters provides a more broad heaven and earth, the painters can get more opportunities to try and explore new forms of expression by combining watercolor painting with other art forms, such as oil painting, sketching, printmaking, etc, to create a more rich and diverse works. At the same time, it has gradually attracted more and more art lovers, providing a broad space for creative experiment and practice for the public watercolor lovers, greatly enriching the artistic language of watercolor painting, and expanding the boundary of watercolor painting. Through continuous learning and absorption, digital watercolor painting will have enormous development potential, gradually forming its own unique artistic style and aesthetic value.

In the development of digital watercolor painting, a perfect combination of traditional culture and modern technology can be seen. Through computer technology, digital watercolor painting not only maintains the artistic style and characteristics of traditional watercolor painting but also introduces new artistic expressions and techniques through modern technological means, promoting the exchange and collision between watercolor painting and other art forms, and further expanding the field of artistic creation. It also provides creators with a more international perspective, allowing them to more easily understand and learn from the art and culture of different countries, thereby creating more diverse and internationally renowned works of art. While promoting the popularization and promotion of watercolor art, it also brings new opportunities and challenges to the cultivation of a new generation of watercolor talents. I believe that in the near future, the development prospects of digital watercolor painting will be even broader, becoming a major highlight of contemporary art. At the same time, digital watercolor painting will also pay more attention to the inheritance and promotion of traditional watercolor painting. Based on maintaining the characteristics of traditional watercolor painting, we continuously innovate and activate it. Through continuous reference and absorption, digital watercolor painting will gradually form its own unique artistic style and aesthetic value. In short, digital watercolor painting has enormous development potential.

From the perspective of Oriental aesthetic analysis, to make watercolor works bridge the mind and heart of the painter and the viewer, it is required to take the picture as a carrier to bring the observer into



the common mood and slowly construct a synchronized evaluation system. For example, traditional Chinese artworks pay attention to the spiritual realm of "vividness" and "simplicity of brushwork and form." As Wang Yu of the Qing Dynasty said in "painting theory of Dongzhuang", "There is a kind of painting that, when it first comes to the eye, is roughly dressed and disordered and does not abide by the rules and ink, but when you look at it more closely, it is vivid and full of flavor, which is the a rule without rules." He considered such formal language and the spiritual realm as one of the essential criteria for evaluating the divine quality. Under this context, behind the many appearances of contemporary Chinese watercolor paintings, the essence is the painter's observation and communication of the spiritual connotation of Chinese culture within the same context. Lin Fengmian once stated "Watercolor painting, like other types of painting, cannot be divided from three qualities: nationality, which should be known to be Oriental and Chinese at first glance, and even if it is a foreign method, sooner or later it must be connected with the national tradition and become nationalized and Chinese; Epochal character, not only in terms of ideas, but also in terms of forms. Individuality, different painters have different personal styles due to their national and contemporary characteristics. These three characteristics allow for amazing creativity." (Lin, 2014). Nowadays, although times have varied, diverse forms can also be extended infinitely in creating Chinese watercolor paintings. Although the times have changed, diverse forms can also be infinitely extended in the creation of Chinese watercolor painting; the breadth of cognition and thinking of the painters in the same freehand context can direct them into a broader field. For example, contemporary watercolor painter Dou Fengzhi's painting "Snow" (Figure 6) depicts the snow scenery of the church in the old urban area of Qingdao, Shandong. The painter depicts buildings in warm colors and mountains in cool colors, forming a complementary color scheme. At the same time, he pays attention to the treatment of the composition form. Through his works, he can combine the composition of Western paintings, the contrast between cold and warm, and the aesthetic conception of the East, making the work have both spatial relationships and contemporary Eastern color schemes. It is a work with the charm of contemporary watercolor art.



Figure 6 'Snow' - Snow Scenery of the Church in the Old Town of Qingdao, by Dou Feng, until 2019

Note: http://www.360doc.com/content/20/0514/10/15473865_912238794.shtml

From the perspectives of materials and techniques, as younger generations of watercolor painters emerge, contemporary Chinese watercolor painting has become more diverse in expression and richer in painting language, with many painters seeking the formation of individualized language on the screen. For instance, after the 1960s, Hou Anzhi, Jiang Zhinan, Dong Kecheng, Du Zuo, Wang Shaobo, Zhou Gang, and other watercolor painters have played a role in the development of watercolor painting, while more and more watercolor paintings have been shown prominently in large national exhibitions such as the National Art Exhibition. The closer we look at the images, the more the watercolor works are of modern times, and the more they incorporate new techniques and materials. In the meantime, painters have become more and more experienced with watercolor materials. Thus, they can fully utilize water, brushwork, texture,

composition, and even paper materials in their paintings, especially the fluid material "water" in watercolor, which is constantly replaced or mixed with other fluid materials. For example, they combined several types of oil (turpentine, tar, etc.) in the process of watercolor creation, and through controlling the degree of wetness and dryness of fluid materials on the surface of watercolor paper and the speed of color block formation, a new visual impact can be obtained. For instance, in Shao Yuhao's series "Qinghuayu" (Figure 7), the works not only have strong technical control, but also reflect the artist's reflection and activation of traditional Chinese art. In the works, the traditional craft culture of blue and white is given new usage scenarios and cultural contexts to integrate traditional culture into modern life. It is precisely the traditional Chinese freehand brushwork spirit that has achieved the artistry in the works. To give another example, Chinese watercolor painter Liu Shouxiang, whose watercolor paintings have opened up new fields of watercolor creation with his unique style and rigorous creative attitude, has cultivated generations of new talents in watercolor creation. He is familiar with and adept at utilizing the characteristics of different painting materials. After multiple experiments, he mixed watercolor pigments with Chinese painting pigments or acrylic painting pigments to create a series of still life and landscape paintings (Figure 8). He observed the different effects of the created images after use, summarized a set of color theory, and applied it to later watercolor painting creation and teaching.



Figure 7 "Blue and White Fish" by Shao Yuhao in 2016
Note: https://gallery.artron.net/works/2262_w331000.html



Figure 8 Watercolor Landscape by Liu Shouxiang in 2018
Note: http://k.sina.com.cn/article_6135747824_p16db814f000100jv1v.html

Discussion

This paper explores the development of contemporary Chinese watercolor painting, especially the integration and innovation in the context of traditional freehand painting. First, it analyzes how the natural



fluidity of watercolor painting can be combined with modern artistic techniques to retain its traditional charm and expand its expressiveness. Then, it discusses how interdisciplinary methods can enhance the artistic depth of watercolor painting, including technological innovation, modern reinterpretation of traditional methods, and interdisciplinary cooperation. In addition, it discusses how the spirit of Chinese freehand painting is reflected in watercolor painting, including the aesthetic orientation of freehand painting, the impact of cultural differences on artistic creation, and how to incorporate the spirit of traditional Chinese painting in watercolor painting. From the perspectives of regional influence, development of the times, analysis of oriental aesthetics, and materials and techniques, it explores the development of contemporary Chinese watercolor painting, including the characteristics of watercolor painting in different regions, the rise of digital watercolor painting, and how artists convey the spiritual connotation of Chinese culture through their works. At the same time, by analyzing the artists' works and related literature, it discusses how artists explore and theorize the development of Chinese watercolor painting in practice, and how they incorporate personal style and theory into the creation of Chinese watercolor painting. Finally, it is concluded that the development of contemporary Chinese watercolor painting requires artists to further study the use of relevant materials in the creative process, emphasizing the importance of creating in the unique Chinese context, learning and understanding traditional culture, to create a new era of watercolor painting that combines Eastern and Western aesthetics. These discussions guide future artistic practice and academic research.

Conclusion

In the current context, the development of contemporary Chinese watercolor painting requires painters to further study the use of relevant materials in the creative process, maintaining a creative state that is both intertwined and independent of other painting types. For creators, it is more important to focus on learning and understanding the language of traditional Chinese culture. At the same time, learning the excellent traditional Chinese humanistic spirit, enhancing aesthetic style and taste, and immersing work creation in a unique Chinese context. It can create a new era of watercolor painting that combines Eastern aesthetic concepts with Western aesthetic tastes. At the same time, the development of contemporary watercolor painting can also drive the common development of other water-based material paintings, especially the development of traditional Chinese ink painting, which is conducive to the inheritance and dissemination of Chinese traditional culture.

On conclusion, the development of contemporary Chinese watercolor painting demands a dual commitment: one to the inheritance of traditional cultural values and another to innovation within interdisciplinary and technological frameworks. Artists are encouraged to deeply engage with the spiritual core of Chinese aesthetics—particularly the xieyi tradition—while embracing contemporary materials and platforms. A sustainable future for watercolor lies not only in technique but also in mindset: the courage to reinterpret heritage, and the vision to integrate art with digital life.

As Chinese watercolor continues to evolve, it has the potential to influence not only the fine arts field but also broader visual culture, including design, architecture, and interactive media. Through this convergence, a new generation of artworks can emerge that are emotionally resonant, culturally rooted, and globally relevant.

Recommendation

For Artists:

Experiment with digital painting tools such as Procreate, Adobe Fresco that simulate watercolor effects, and explore cross-disciplinary practices by collaborating with designers, ceramicists, and animators. Refer to classic ink painting techniques such as "Cun" (wrinkle texture strokes) or "Liubai" (blank space), draw extensively on the technical and spiritual essence of traditional Chinese ink painting, combine modern art concepts, and develop a personal style rooted in Chinese tradition.

For Educators:





Introduce cross-media courses that bridge watercolor and digital art, including modules on AR visualization, interactive installations, or hybrid printmaking. Encourage students to analyze traditional painting principles through new formats like media or web-based exhibitions.

For Policymakers and Institutions:

Support interdisciplinary exhibitions and innovation incubators focused on watercolor and traditional arts. Establish funding schemes for projects that combine cultural preservation with technological exploration (e.g., “Digital Xieyi Labs” or mobile watercolor workshops).

For the Academic Community:

Promote comparative studies between Eastern and Western watercolor systems, and publish bilingual research that elevates Chinese discourse within global art theory. Establish peer-reviewed forums focused on “Contemporary Xieyi Studies” or “Watercolor in the Digital Age.”

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