

Contemporary Expressions of the Pilu Temple Murals, Shijiazhuang, Hebei, China: A Visual Dialogue Between Intangible Cultural Heritage and Modern Art

Tianbo Gao^{1*} and Pongdej Chaiyakut²

Faculty of Fine Arts, Burapha University, Thailand¹

Faculty of Fine Arts, Chiangmai University, Thailand²

*Corresponding author, e-mail: 1010776437@qq.com

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Abstract

As important residua of ancient Chinese religious art, the murals of Pilu Temple reflect a distinct visual language and great cultural significance. Based on the Buddhist Water-Land ritual and combining with Confucian, Buddhist, and Daoist imagery, folk beliefs and social psychology. Having lost primary ritual functions, the murals now stand as core intangible cultural heritage symbols and critical visual resources for modern artistic creation. Through field surveys, on-site sketching, archival research, and iconographical analysis, combined with the frameworks of semiotics, iconography, and folklore, this study analyzes the visual characteristics and aesthetic value of the Pilu Temple murals, and further explores their potential for transformation within contemporary art.

Keywords: Pilu Temple murals, intangible cultural heritage, contemporary painting, visual symbols

Introduction

Painted during the Ming dynasty, the Water-Land murals of Pilu Temple are extensively acknowledged for their grand composition, rich colors, complicated iconography, and big narrative mechanism. Frequently known as one of the “Four Great Chinese Murals,” the Pilu Temple murals include various deities, spirits, historical figures, and scenes of human suffering, collectively expressing folk beliefs and social psychology in the interweaving of regional folklore, religious rituals, and ethical ideas (Zhengding Institute of Cultural Heritage, 2022b).

While holding great value in art history, this set of murals is distinct in cultural publicity and religious measure, acting as an excellent representative of northern Chinese religious art, with its systematicity, narrativity, and symbolism representative in Ming dynasty murals. Buddhist, Daoist, and Confucian beliefs are integrated, expressing by large group portraits, complicated spatial sequences, and symbolic visual language.

Past scholarship has mostly paid attention to the murals’ historical context, stylistic characteristics, and protection (Hebei Provincial Cultural Heritage Research, 2021; Zhengding Institute

of Cultural Heritage, 2022a). Nevertheless, under the extending background of globalization and modern art, the question of how to reexplain these murals as a visual language for contemporary artistic generation remains underdiscussed. Although existing studies have extensively explored the historical background, artistic features, and conservation of the Pilu Temple murals, research on how their visual language can be systematically transformed into contemporary painting remains limited. Therefore, this study aims to bridge this gap by exploring the reinterpretation and application of Shuilu mural visual elements within contemporary painting. As the religious function of temple murals diminishes and their status as cultural heritage increases, they become potential resources for contemporary artists seeking ways to integrate tradition into modern visual culture. In this shift, they are no longer religious media but become visual cultural resources that can be reinterpreted and recreated. Building on field research and doctoral studies, this paper examines how mural elements are transformed into contemporary painting and explores the corresponding challenges and potentials.

Over the past century, many outstanding traditional murals have been lost or destroyed during wars, suffering both man-made damage and natural erosion. These murals are all at risk of disappearing. Driven by the urgency of addressing this issue.

Therefore, Through integrating Eastern religious culture into contemporary artistic styles, this mode of publicity and growth maintains the key of conventional culture while driving the innovation and extension of artistic forms through modern views and approaches. Ancient murals are allowed to keep changing under a novel cultural background, serving as an artistic bridge that exceeds time and space. this study revolves around the following research questions:

- 1) What are the unique visual characteristics of the Water and Land Murals in Pilu Temple?
- 2) What cultural values and aesthetic connotations do the Pilu Temple Water and Land Murals embody?
- 3) How can the visual language of the Pilu Temple Water and Land Murals be transformed into contemporary artistic creation?

Objectives

1. To examine the distinct content, expressive forms, and techniques of the Water and Land Murals in Pilu Temple.
2. To explores the cultural values, aesthetic characteristics, and symbolic meanings embedded in the Pilu Temple Water and Land Murals, thereby promoting the inheritance and development of traditional culture.
3. To provide practical guidance for artistic generation in virtue of these study contributions, allowing the broader spread of the Water and Land Mural culture and growing public attention to the Water and Land Murals in Pilu Temple.

Literature Review

1. In the Field of Temple Mural Research

Extensive research on temple murals has yielded fruitful academic achievements and accumulated a vast body of literature. Current scholarship primarily revolves around the historical background, artistic features, symbolic significance, and cultural relic preservation of the Pilu Temple Water and Land Murals. However, existing scholarship has primarily been conducted from the perspectives of art history, cultural heritage, and religious studies, while research on how the visual language of Water and Land Murals is transformed into contemporary art practice remains limited. Therefore, it is necessary to further explore the reinterpretation and application of this visual language in contemporary painting.

Concerning the studies of Pilu Temple and its Water and Land Murals, Chen (1982) discussed in his research that Pilu Temple and its famous Water and Land Murals have great historical and cultural value, and artistic features. In the meantime, the temple's historical evolution, architectural layout, and its key status in the publicity of Buddhism were sorted out comprehensively. On this basis, he pointed out the artistic features and cultural connotation of the Water and Land Murals in Pilu Temple, holding that they serve as an important model for the study of ancient Chinese religious mural art. Chen's study provides an important historical foundation for understanding the artistic and cultural significance of the Pilu Temple murals. However, the study mainly focuses on historical interpretation and cultural value, without discussing their application in contemporary artistic creation.

Regarding the research on the murals of Pilu Temple in Hebei, Kong & Meng (2021) mentioned in their study that the discussion should be carried out based on the artistic characteristics and inheritance value of the murals against the background of cultural changes and the development of the times. On this basis, they pointed out the outstanding artistic standards of the murals in Pilu Temple in terms of modeling, composition, color, and decorative patterns. By analyzing the traditional techniques and styles of the murals, they provided references for contemporary artistic creation. Concerning the integrated development of traditional and modern art, they argued that relevant research can promote the integration process of traditional art and modern art. Although this study discusses the heritage value of the murals, it fails to systematically explain how traditional mural elements can be transformed into a contemporary visual language.

In terms of the research on the techniques and methods of restoring traditional murals, Liang Yi (2020) mentioned in his study that the research focuses on the restoration of traditional murals in Longquan Temple and Puguang Temple, Taiyuan, and mainly summarizes the different manifestations and development of two methods: "emulation" and "reconstruction." The key definitions were also clarified "emulation" represents the direct imitation or recreation of past artists' works, highlighting the continuation of conventional art by learning and reproducing ancient methods;

varied from simple imitation, the re-generation of the original work's spirit and connotation is highlighted by reconstruction, which is a "rebirth" of conventional works that combines individual insight and expression and remains faithful to the original. On this basis, he pointed out the artistic creation practice of "emulation" and "reconstruction" as well as their cultural inheritance value, and conducted a systematic analysis of the two, enriching the theoretical framework of Chinese traditional art research. Concerning the integration of tradition and modernity and the inheritance of cultural heritage, he argued that the relevant research especially provides new ideas for the integration of traditional techniques and modern art. However, this study primarily focuses on mural restoration techniques, rather than the creative transformation of the murals' visual language in contemporary painting. By personally explaining "emulation" and "reconstruction" by contemporary artists, the modern inheritance of conventional culture can be usefully publicized, theoretically backing the safeguarding and innovation of cultural heritage.

2. In the Field of Contemporary Painting Research and Visual Semiotics

In terms of the study of the usage of conventional mural methods and expressive forms in modern art, Meng & Wang (2025) discussed in his research that the key of the study is to explore the fundamental methods of conventional murals, such as the fluency of lines, the sense of hierarchy in colors, and the distinctness of materials. As he also expressed, these methods can offer modern artists rich creative inspiration, particularly in the innovation of composition, color matching, and expressive methods, where conventional methods can bring contemporary painting novel dimensions. Based on this, the application value of conventional mural methods in modern painting production was indicated, digging how artists combine conventional factors with contemporary styles. Regarding the inheritance and innovation of conventional murals in modern times, they believed that attention should be paid to the re-generation of the content, themes, and symbolic significance of conventional murals in modern art. As he noted, amid variations in social and cultural environments, these murals have been offered novel expressions and meanings.

Regarding the symbolic re-generation of conventional murals and modern art, Ma (2024) discussed in her research that the key is to dig how symbolic and emblematic factors in conventional murals are reexplained and changed by modern artists to satisfy contemporary social and cultural demands. Based on this, the innovative transformation methods of conventional mural symbols by modern painters were pointed out, which clarified that these changes can show contemporary society's cultural needs and artistic expressions. Concerning the linkage between tradition and modern art, she believed that the contemporary change of conventional mural symbols drives modern art innovation, and highlights the mutual impact and great linkage between tradition and modern art.

Concerning the impact of ancient mural art on modern art, Martyka et al. (2025) discussed in her research that the study pays attention to the discussion on the usage of color, formal

expression, and the re-generation of historical symbols in ancient murals in contemporary works. By analyzing ancient mural art, she shows how modern artists draw on these conventional factors to generate visual art with modern importance. Based on this, the influence of ancient mural art on modern artistic generation was pointed out, paying attention to how conventional mural methods are combined with contemporary visual language in Western art. Regarding the reference and integration of conventional and contemporary art, they believed that conventional factors in ancient murals offer modern visual art generation significant back, and the expressive forms of modern art are enriched by the combination between conventional methods and contemporary language.

A comprehensive review of the current academic literature reveals significant dual limitations in the fields of temple mural studies and contemporary artistic transformation. First, traditional mural scholarship primarily treats these sacred heritages as static historical specimens or frozen artifacts. While successfully documenting their iconography, it fails to provide an operable, studio-based generative framework for transforming ancient visual languages into modern creative practices. Second, although contemporary art discourse advocates the integration of traditional motifs, these studies remain overly generalized, focusing almost exclusively on Dunhuang patterns or Western street art aesthetics. Consequently, there remains a clear empirical gap in addressing the dense, multi-layered, and ideologically complex Water-Land imagery structures characteristic of late imperial China. By establishing a systematic visual symbol recoding model tailored specifically to the Pulu Temple murals, this paper effectively bridges the gap between static religious history and dynamic contemporary scholarly painting.

Conceptual Framework

As Figure 1 shows, the conceptual framework comprises four components: traditional mural elements, relevant theories, contemporary artistic creation, and artistic practice. It first forms a knowledge system via researching Pulu Temple mural elements to support contemporary creation. Relevant theories (folklore, iconology, etc.) provide academic backing. Rooted in Panofsky's iconology and visual semiotics, the model clarifies the logical flow from heritage resources to contemporary creation as below: 1) Traditional mural elements (input variables): This layer compiles the foundational heritage data extracted from the Pulu Temple murals, with particular emphasis on traditional iron-wire line drawing (tiexian miao), complex mineral color formulations, and hierarchical spatial arrangements. 2) Transformation processes (structural mechanisms): This operational phase employs three core studio-based mechanisms-visual symbol recoding, multimedia texture experimentation (integrating raised gesso with coarse mineral pigments), and multi-perspective structural deconstruction. 3) Contemporary artistic outcomes (output layer): The final vector manifests as a series of fully realized modern mixed-media paintings, successfully recontextualizing the intangible cultural heritage values within the contemporary global art gallery environment.

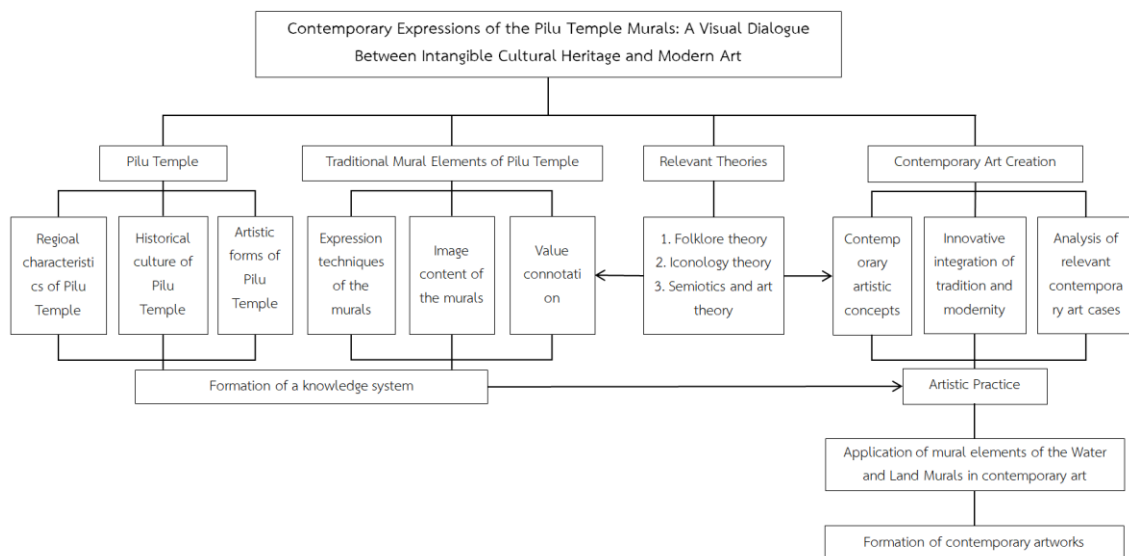


Figure 1 Conceptual Framework Diagram

Research Methodology

Based on classical iconological study principles, this research adopts a qualitative research design use qualitative study approaches such as interviews, observations, literature review and discussion on various historical materials, so as to investigate the features and properties of the study object and their associations.

The literature review method involves collecting and organizing relevant data through literature analysis and field investigations. Folklore theory is applied to study the origin and cultural beliefs of the Water and Land Murals in Pilu Temple. In this paper, semiotic theory is used to identify, extract, and summarize the symbols, traditions, activities, beliefs, and universal values of Water and Land culture as reflected in the lines, colors, shapes, and forms of the murals. The literature review also provides the theoretical foundation for interpreting the findings and supports the achievement of Research Objectives One and Two.

The field investigation method entails conducting on-site inspections at Pilu Temple. semi-structured interviews were conducted Three specialists were interviewed with mural researchers, art educators, and contemporary artists to obtain professional perspectives on the artistic characteristics, cultural values, and contemporary transformation of the murals. The interview topics included mural composition, visual language, religious symbolism, artistic techniques, and contemporary applications. This paper discusses typical scenes and figures in the murals deeply, such as composition approaches, color application, line treatment, and detail depiction, to dig their artistic expression methods. The basis for creating modern artworks inspired by the Water and Land Murals of Pilu Temple is finally laid by this process.

Artistic practice and generation are made from the view of semiotic aesthetics, which involves considerations and experiments on colors, materials, and other factors. In this study, artistic creation theory is employed to integrate and re-create the elements of the Water and Land Murals of Pilu Temple with contemporary art forms. This practice-based approach corresponds to Research Objective Three by examining the feasibility of transforming traditional mural elements into contemporary visual expressions while preserving their cultural significance.

Results

1. The unique content, expressive forms, and technical skills of the Water and Land Murals of Pilu Temple

1.1 Mural Content

Pilu Temple preserves over 200 square meters of murals, distributed in Sakyamuni Hall and Pilu Hall. Centered on sinicized Buddha's life stories, the themes integrate deities of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism, Confucian sages' moral teachings and folk social life scenes, with the murals in Pilu Hall as the research focus. Completed during the Jiajing reign of the Ming Dynasty, these murals cover 122 square meters, consisting of 122 groups with 508 divine figures, narrating around the three realms of heaven, earth and human.

As shown in Table 1, the four walls of Pilu Hall vary in themes: the east and west walls (2.8m high, 7.6m wide) focus on Taoist content, each with 30 groups of figures (125 and 133 respectively) interspersed with a few Buddhist deities; the south wall (same size as east and west walls) centers on Confucian ethics and beings who died unnatural deaths, with the east section dominated by Yinlu Wang Pusa (Bodhisattva, King of Guidance), 13 groups of 73 figures combining religious attributes and secular marks of the Ming Dynasty; the north wall (2.8m high, 3.95m wide) focuses on Buddhist themes, symmetrically arranging ten Vajra Kings and other figures, with 19 groups of 70 figures in the east section mainly being Buddhist bodhisattvas and vajras.

Table 1 Detailed Information of the Murals

Position	Height (m)	Width (m)	Number of Groups	Number of Figures	Area (m ²)	Theme
North	2.8	10.7	36	124	20.96	Buddhist and Taoist Themes
South	2.8	7.6	30	125	21.28	Buddhist and Taoist Themes
East	2.8	7.6	30	133	21.28	Taoist Themes
West	2.8	10.7	27	126	20.96	Confucian and Taoist Themes

Rather than treating these quantified spatial distributions as mere static inventory data, this empirical distribution must be interpreted through classical iconology and visual semiotics.

Through a semiotic decoding. Grounded in Panofsky's secondary level of iconographical analysis, the dense grouping of the 508 individual characters reflects the late-imperial socio-religious syncretic hierarchy of Ming Dynasty society in Shijiazhuang, Hebei, China. This numerical density functions as a structural constraint that codifies complex sacred narratives into a localized visual syntax, serving as the foundational image database for contemporary studio-based semiotic recoding.

1.2 Color and Techniques

Ming Dynasty painting established a color application system centered around the five traditional colors: blue-green (qing), yellow, red, white, and black. The Water and Land Murals of Pilu Temple boast a rich palette characterized by prominent warm tones, audacious color choices, and a strong decorative quality. Through the strategic employment of complementary colors, the murals generate a powerful visual impact alongside a solemn and majestic artistic atmosphere. Furthermore, the extensive application of the Lifen Tiejin (raised-gilding) technique enhances the three-dimensional effect of the imagery, thereby accentuating the sacred divinity of the deities.

The murals primarily utilize mineral pigments such as azurite (shiqing), orpiment (shihuang), cinnabar (zhusha), and ochre (zheshi), vividly conveying the textures of various objects. The figures are executed using the traditional Gongbi (meticulous fine-brush) technique, employing fluid and expressive lines to achieve a harmonious unity between realism and spirit resonance (chuan shen), which reflects the lineage of figure painting since the Tang and Song Dynasties. The characters possess natural countenances and elegant, simplified attire, with their floating ribbons and drapery folds rendered seamlessly in a single, continuous breath.

1.3 Composition Expression

Despite numerous deities, the murals have an orderly and hierarchical composition, sorely adopting a "spatial symmetry" layout. Deities with similar functions and status are grouped and painted on symmetrical walls to form echoes, strengthening the connection between walls. Within the framework of visual linguistics, this 'spatial symmetry' (detailed in Table 2) acts as a strict structural syntax that governs the viewer's somatic and visual journey within the hall. The echo effect generated between the eastern, western, and northern walls functions as a closed semiotic circuit. This structural symmetry ensures that individual iconographic signs are not read in isolation, but are constantly decoded in relation to their binary opposites across the ritual space, directly reinforcing the Buddhist theological order.

Table 2 Detailed Symmetry Table of the Murals

Wall Name	East Wall	West Wall	Northeast Wall	Northwest Wall
Symmetrical Mural Content	1. True Lord of Clear Source and Wonderful Dao	1. True Lord Protecting the Nation in Chongning Reign	1. Brahma and Retinue	1. Indra and Retinue
	2. Four Sea Dragon Kings and Retinue	2. Four Great Rivers Dragon Gods and Retinue	2. Padmapāṇi Vajra King & Samantabhadra	2. Jyotisena Vajra King & Manjushri
	3. Eastern, Central & Southern Yue Mountain Deities	3. Northern & Western Yue Mountain Deities and Retinue	Bodhisattva	Bodhisattva
	4. Great Emperor of Longevity in the South Pole	4. Supreme Emperor of the Purple Forbidden in the North Pole	3. Hayagrīva Vajra King & Guanyin	3. Trailokyavijaya Vajra King & Vajrapāṇi
	5. Six Jia Generals	5. Six Ding Goddesses	Bodhisattva	Bodhisattva
	6. Seven Lunar Mansions (Dou, Niu, Nu, Xu, Wei, Shi, Bi)	6. Seven Lunar Mansions (Jing, Gui, Liu, Xing, Zhang, Yi, Zhen)	4. Sixteen Eminent Monks	4. Sixteen Eminent Monks
	7. Seven Lunar Mansions (Jiao, Kang, Di, Fang, Xin, Wei, Ji)	7. Seven Lunar Mansions (Kui, Lou, Wei, Mao, Bi, Zi, Shen)	5. Devas and Nagas (Eight Classes of Heavenly Beings)	5. Devas and Nagas and Retinue

2. The Values, Aesthetics, and Connotations of the Water and Land Murals of Pilu Temple

As an important part of Chinese Buddhist art, the Water and Land Murals of Pilu Temple profoundly reflect regional culture and social spiritual life. As a relatively well-preserved Water and Land Mural relic in Hebei Province, they provide an important model for studying the localization of Buddhist art.

2.1 Belief Background and Religious Functions

Originating from Buddhist Water and Land Dharma Assemblies, Water and Land paintings aim to “liberate all beings in the six realms of transmigration”. The murals of Pilu Temple present Buddhist cosmology and the six-realm transmigration system through images to realize the visual dissemination of religious doctrines. Integrating Taoist immortality pursuit and Confucian ethical order, they embody the cultural characteristics of the integration of three religions, reflecting the “syncretism of three religions” trend in the Ming Dynasty and serving religious rituals, psychological comfort and moral education.

2.2 Spiritual Enlightenment and Educational Functions

The murals have distinct functions of “encouraging goodness and punishing evil” and “guiding customs”. By depicting the joys and sorrows of the six realms, hell punishments and heavenly blessings, they strengthen the concept of karma, guide believers to cultivate virtue, trigger reflections on life and reincarnation, and inspire the yearning for religious redemption.

2.3 Interaction Between Religious Symbols and Local Society

Deeply rooted in local social life, the murals have distinct folk characteristics in figures' costumes and postures, reflecting the in-depth integration of Buddhist art with local culture. They construct a harmonious divine system centered on Buddhist deities and coexisting with Confucian and Taoist deities, with figures on the east, west and south walls worshipping towards the north wall, presenting the concept of the syncretism of three religions led by Buddhism.

2.4 Presentation of Social Ethics and Patriarchal Concepts

The folk nature of the murals is reflected in the ethical concepts they convey. Family group images in the paintings integrate Confucian filial piety and Buddhist filial respect, echoing local ancestor worship customs, enhancing the murals' affinity and educational function, and becoming a visual carrier for folk ethical education (Figure 2).



Figure 2 Ancient Filial Sons and Virtuous Grandsons, photograph of Pilu Temple Murals

Source: Tianbo Gao (2025)

2.5 Karma and Retribution and Allegorical Expression

The murals extensively depict karma themes, conveying the concept of “good deeds rewarded, evil deeds punished” through hell punishment details. These punishment symbols have both religious warning and ethical allegorical functions, strengthening the dissemination of religious ideas through “replacing words with visuals” and helping maintain social order (Figure 3).



Figure 3 Ancient Women Who Died from Abortion or Childbirth, photograph of Pilu Temple Murals

Source: Tianbo Gao (2025)

3. The Application of the Water and Land Murals of Pilu Temple in Artistic Creation

Covering the three realms of heaven, earth, gods, ghosts and humans, the Water and Land Murals of Pilu Temple are a visual narrative of religious belief and a microcosm of social culture. Under the background of modern art, this research creation aims at achieving the creative change of these image resources, offering them both historical depth and contemporary value.

3.1 Cultural Response to the Contemporary Social Context

Showing the living circumstances and spiritual outlook of ancient society, the murals touch on universal human problems including power, suffering and redemption, which still show practical importance today. By reexplaining mural themes, the creation sets up linkages with modern social problems including ecological crises and identity recognition, so that the works becomes a cross-age cultural reflection.

3.2 Contemporary Expression of Lines

With calligraphic expressiveness and decorativeness, lines are a core artistic feature of the murals. In contemporary transformation, breaking through the constraints of traditional neat line drawing, lines are regarded as independent elements for expressing emotion and energy. Combining oil pastels and acrylic brushes, techniques such as fragmentation and overlapping are used to retain the flowing rhythm of traditional lines and convey contemporary artistic tension.

3.3 Symbolism and Transformation of Color

As a core element, the murals' symbolic color system (gold for sacredness, vermilion for auspiciousness, etc.) combines religious functions and folk aesthetics. In contemporary creation, this symbolic system is borrowed and integrated with modern abstract color language. Through simplification into color blocks and acrylic splashing, combined with modern color contrast concepts, traditional colors achieve contemporary presentation in new materials.

3.4 Narrative and Reorganization of Composition

With distinct “hierarchical narrative” characteristics, the mural composition reflects Buddhist cosmic order. In contemporary transformation, the traditional hierarchical composition is deconstructed and reorganized: symmetrical geometric composition is used for Confucian and Taoist figures; the horizontal extension method of murals is borrowed for social groups to form narratives, integrating modern visual expression methods to expand the expressive dimension of picture space.

3.5 Innovation in Materials and Techniques

Breaking through the limitations of single traditional techniques, mixed media are introduced in creation: transparent overlay of acrylic and ink pigments simulates the color depth of murals; traditional carriers such as rice paper are integrated with modern canvases to create a material effect with both historical texture and modern tension; scraping and collage are used to simulate the mottled texture of murals, echoing historical traces.

3.6 The Overall Value of the Transformation of Mural Elements

The “recontextualization” of conventional mural factors is realized by the modern change of lines, colors, composition and materials, realizing the goals of maintaining the spiritual symbolism and aesthetic tradition of the murals; satisfying the visual experience of modern audiences in virtue of mixed media; driving the regeneration of intangible cultural heritage in contemporary art by reexplaining conventional symbols with novel visual language. This change changes the murals from historical relics to an inspiration origin for modern painting, reflecting the value of cultural heritage safeguarding and activation, and offering cross-cultural expression in modern art a novel path.

4. Validation of Results via Qualitative Expert Interviews

To transition the results from an individual practitioner’s subjective studio reflections into an objectively validated academic discourse, this section explicitly integrates the empirical data gathered during the qualitative interview phase of this research. A total of five key informants (N = 5) were engaged in semi-structured academic interviews to triangulate the visual and material findings. The purposively sampled panel comprised three distinct expert cohorts to guarantee interdisciplinary rigor: Informants A and B (two senior academic art historians specializing in Ming Dynasty Buddhist iconographic systems), Informant C (one cultural heritage conservation expert from the local relics bureau in Shijiazhuang, Hebei, China), and Informants D and E (two contemporary academic painters with over fifteen years of experience in heritage-to-studio fine art transformation).

Interviews targeted three core research dimensions: 1) the semiotic visual syntax and spatial seating logic embedded within Shuilu ritual paintings; 2) the material boundaries, preservation parameters, and simulation techniques of traditional mineral pigment application, particularly the raised gold-lining (lijin) technique; and 3) the structural methodological pathways required to translate dense late-imperial religious motifs into modern abstract and expressive fine art vocabularies without losing heritage authenticity.

The systematic thematic analysis of the interview transcriptions yielded critical empirical validations that directly support and justify the contemporary artistic transformation results achieved in Section 3:

1.Validation of Visual Syntax Reconstruction: Informants A and B (the art historians) cross-examined the structural deconstruction used in the 'Pilu · Awakened Series.' They validated that the geometric abstraction executed in the studio successfully preserved the underlying 'syncretic hierarchy' of the murals. They noted that by maintaining the relative scale and spatial weights of the primary deities, the modern abstract compositions successfully retain their historical narrative power, preventing the contemporary canvases from degenerating into empty, ungrounded decorative abstraction.

2.Validation of Material and Textural Simulation: Informant C (the conservation expert) provided precise technical parameters regarding the mineral density and environmental interactions of traditional pigments. This professional feedback verified that the multi-media texturing methods developed in this research-which blend historical gesso formulas with raw mineral powders on modern canvas-accurately simulate the tactile density of traditional lijn while ensuring modern structural durability and archival stability.

3.Validation of Aesthetic Recontextualization Pathways: Informants D and E (the contemporary academic painters) evaluated the final painting series through a semiotic lens. They confirmed that deconstructing traditional rigid iron-wire lines into gestural, expressive marks allows the historical rhythm and spiritual energy (qiyun) to survive within contemporary global gallery environments. This qualitative evidence bridges the gap between historical relic conservation and living artistic practice, fully substantiating the methodology declared .

Conclusion and Discussion

1. Conclusion

Through the exploration of the contemporary artistic creation of the Water and Land Murals of Pilu Temple, this study draws the following core conclusions: First, contemporary artistic creation is an effective carrier for the activated communication of traditional murals. Through the integration of techniques such as simplification and abstraction as well as modern materials and techniques, the contemporary expression of traditional religious and historical themes can be achieved while preserving the aesthetic characteristics and cultural core of the murals. Second, the current research on Pilu Temple Murals has problems such as insufficient interdisciplinary integration and the need to deepen research on visual language. Paths such as establishing a theoretical framework of “Traditional Images - Contemporary Art” and promoting the integration of theory and practice in art education are key to improving the research system and facilitating cultural inheritance and innovation. This study clarifies the core logic and practical direction of the contemporary

transformation of traditional murals, provides feasible ideas for the living inheritance and cross-temporal and spatial communication of traditional religious art, and lays a foundation for subsequent research in related fields.

2. Discussion

As one of the excellent representatives of ancient Chinese religious art, the Water and Land Murals of Pilu Temple attract the attention of many experts. A lot of academic papers and study materials have been published on the subject. On basis of a literature review, most research on these murals pays attention to their artistic features, historical context, and protection status. For example, several papers deeply discuss the murals' content, methods, and symbolic significance, digging their distinct status in Chinese religious art. Besides, there is research paying attention to mural safeguarding and restoration techniques, so as to increase the lifespan of these important cultural relics. Nevertheless, no studies have yet been made on the modern artistic re-generation of the Water and Land Murals of Pilu Temple.

Based on the findings of Research Objective One, the Water and Land Murals of Pilu Temple exhibit a highly systematic visual order in terms of thematic structure, figure modeling, coloration system, and spatial composition. The murals not only encompass Buddhist, Daoist, and Confucian deities, but also integrate a wealth of folk beliefs and secular life elements, thereby forming a religious visual system with distinct narrative characteristics. This finding can be explained by the nature of the Water-Land Ceremony as a comprehensive religious ritual that relies extensively on visual imagery for religious instruction, spiritual salvation, and ethical education. It is consistent with Panofsky's iconological approach of moving "from form to meaning" and supports Su Jianping's view that Water-Land murals perform religious functions through visual representation. These findings further demonstrate that the murals function not merely as decorative paintings but as visual media embedded within ritual practice (Su, 2006; Xia, 2023)

According to the findings of Research Objective Two, the Water and Land Murals of Pilu Temple possess multifaceted cultural values in fields such as religious expression, ethical education, and social psychology. Through visual narratives of karmic retribution, the cycle of life and death, and the contrast between good and evil, the murals continue to play an important role in spiritual enlightenment and moral edification. These results demonstrate that the murals not only preserve traditional religious beliefs but also disseminate ethical values through symbolic visual storytelling, thereby manifesting their enduring cultural significance. This finding can be explained by the social and religious context of the Ming Dynasty, in which the Shui-Lu murals transformed abstract religious doctrines into accessible visual experiences. As a result, viewers were able to develop emotional resonance and internalize moral values through visual engagement. This interpretation is consistent with folkloristic theory, which regards religious imagery as the visualization of collective beliefs, and

with Barthes' semiotic perspective that images function as mechanisms for constructing cultural meaning. (Barthes, 1972; Zhong, 1988).

Based on the findings of Research Objective Three, the Water and Land Murals of Pilu Temple possess immense potential for sustainable transformation in contemporary artistic creation. Their linework, color palette, composition, and material language can achieve new contextual shifts through reorganization, abstract expression, and medium experimentation, thereby becoming a vital visual resource for contemporary painting. These results demonstrate that the visual language of traditional murals can undergo creative transformation while maintaining its cultural identity, providing a practical reference for contemporary art practices. This is because traditional religious images themselves are highly symbolic and structurally organized, enabling them to generate new meanings through a new visual language even when removed from their original ritual context. This finding is highly consistent with the semiotic theoretical framework of “symbolic recoding” (Eco, 1976; Peirce, 1934)

In conclusion, existing scholarship has yielded fruitful results in areas such as religious functions, art historical periodization, cultural heritage preservation, and the influence of traditional murals on contemporary art. However, few studies have taken the Water and Land Murals of Pilu Temple as their primary subject to systematically investigate their recontextualization and visual reconstruction within contemporary painting. Integrating iconography, semiotics, folklore, field investigation, and artistic creation practice, this study expands upon previous research by more systematically elucidating the pathways through which the visual language of these murals is transformed into contemporary artistic creation, thereby addressing the research gap identified in this study.

Recommendations

1) Theoretical Implications

The findings indicate that future research should strengthen interdisciplinary integration by combining iconology, semiotics, folklore, and visual culture studies. Such an approach would provide a more systematic theoretical framework for interpreting the visual language and cultural significance of the Water and Land Murals of Pilu Temple.

2) Practical Applications

Based on the findings of this study, the visual language of the Water and Land Murals can be further applied to contemporary artistic practices, including digital media, installation art, public art, and art education. These applications would facilitate the creative transformation and contemporary dissemination of traditional mural culture.

3) Future Research Directions

Future studies should expand the research scope by including additional mural sites and conducting comparative analyses across different historical periods and regions. Furthermore,

more empirical research, such as interviews with artists, curators, and heritage conservation specialists, is recommended to strengthen the practical applicability of the findings.

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