

# Art is a form of self-discovery, An interpretation of Tie Yang's oil paintings

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**Abstract:** Tie Yang is a renowned painter trained in the early years of New China, whose oil painting creations can be divided into four periods: the "gray tone" period, the aesthetic lyrical period, the expressionist period, and the comprehensive imagery period. The study of Tie Yang's paintings not only provides indispensable artistic experience for future generations but also helps us to further understand the development of oil painting in China after the founding of New China.

**Keywords:** Tie Yang's oil painting, art, painting style

## 1. Introduction

A careful examination and organization of Tie Yang's oil paintings since the 1950s can roughly be divided into four periods: the "gray tone" period (approximately the 1950s and early 1960s), the aesthetic lyrical period (approximately the mid-to-late 1960s), the expressionist period (spanning from the 1960s to the 1990s), and the comprehensive imagery period (from the 1990s to the present). These four periods permeate each other and support one another. Specifically, Tie Yang's oil painting creation is based on emotional expression, supported by the beauty of form and composition, and employs expressive and freehand techniques, gradually forming a pictorial language style with his personal distinct characteristics.

## 2. The "Gray Tone" period

Tie Yang graduated from the Stage Art Department of the Central Academy of Drama in 1960. Although he did not graduate from a formal pure oil painting major, in that era when design had not truly taken off, painting was the most important part of his studies. As he himself introduced, their study of painting was exactly the same as the curriculum of the art academies at that time. Some major courses were even taken at the Central Academy of Fine Arts, such as art history, architectural history, anatomy, etc.

During that time, the teaching of the "Soviet style" was a key content of the general textbooks for oil painting majors in colleges and universities across the country. As we all know, the biggest characteristic of the "Soviet style" is the combination of form and color, integrating classical modeling with Impressionist colors. In terms of pictorial language, it means the modeling is substantial and powerful, the colors are full and steady, with large brushstrokes and attention to details, which is what we often refer to as the "gray tone". Tie Yang's school days coincided with the heyday of "Soviet style" oil painting. Although he did not follow this path later, the influence of the "Soviet style" on him at the time was natural, and the extent of his mastery can be seen from his work "An Autumn Rain" (1960). From the work, it can be seen that Tie Yang's grasp of the "Soviet style" techniques was very proficient, it can be said to be at ease. The brushwork is bold and summarized, the brushwork is relaxed and powerful, free to collect and release, the colors are low and rich, the tones are harmonious and subtle, and the color relationships are clear and in place. For example, in the treatment of the gray-yellow ground in color and space, although the front, back, left, and right are all yellow, under the precise treatment of the painter, it presents a wonderful color change. The small piece of yellow color in front is heavier and purer, the color on the right side of the picture is gray and dark, and the yellow ground on the left is relatively brighter. Coupled with the subtle changes in the color of the walls of the house in the distance, it thus enhances the sense of space and color hierarchy of the picture. Coupled with

a few characters wearing red and black clothes, the focus of the whole picture is more prominent, the sense of rhythm is stronger, and the artistic expressiveness of the picture is enhanced.

From his many works in the early 1960s, we can see that Tie Yang's mastery of the popular "gray tone" technique at the time was superb. In the environment where Chinese people learning oil painting generally felt that color was a tough problem, Tie Yang had a pair of eyes that could filter the object and convert it into the oil painting language system, especially with a keen ability to capture colors, which is admirable. We know that the key to understanding the "gray tone" style is also in the control of color nuances, tones, and color on-site sense, which is the charm of oil painting language. Tie Yang's ability to control colors beyond ordinary people laid a solid foundation for his future painting path.



Figure 1 "An Autumn Rain", 1960

### 3. Aesthetic lyrical period

Starting from the mid-1960s, Tie Yang's works broke free from the constraints of the "Soviet style" gray tones, becoming brighter. This was mainly reflected in the vivid and clean colors, free and unrestrained brushstrokes, a reduction in rational elements, and an enhancement of lyricism. At a time when the "Soviet style" dominated the art world and the study of Western impressionism and other modernist schools was explicitly prohibited, this approach was undoubtedly a significant breakthrough.

The exploration of Tie Yang's works during this period was not long, but it continued intermittently until the mid-to-late 1970s, intersecting with various expressionist styles. Although unstable and immature, this transitional exploration was of great significance to the artist, as Tie Yang began to ponder the meaning of painting, what it should express, and not just accurately depict the subject, colors, and shapes. As he emphasized, art offers people not a meticulous summary and reproduction of nature, but a confession of the mind. Based on this understanding, Tie Yang created lyrical works during this period, emphasizing the artist's feelings towards the subject of painting. Viewers can sense a subtle lyricism from his oil paintings of this period, which is neither too passionate nor too quiet, but a fresh and elegant beauty of peace, such as his works "Apricot Flower Rain" (1965), "Young Poplar Forest" (1976), and "Small Stream" (1979), which are all representative works of this period.

### 4. Expressionist period

The expressionist period is the most important phase in the formation and development of Tie Yang's painting language, which includes three parts: the exploration of color expressiveness, the investigation of

painting form and compositional beauty, and the exploration of imagistic or abstract expression. These three areas of exploration are relatively independent yet interdependent and intersecting. Overall, the artist centers on emotional expression, with color expression, formal composition, imagistic expression, and abstract expression as the threads that gradually form a unique painting language style.

It is precisely because Tie Yang showed a unique sensitivity and control over color from an early stage that the study of color expressiveness has always been one of his most interesting subjects. Under the extremely closed conditions at the time, Tie Yang still had a magical fascination with various schools since Western Impressionism, which can be glimpsed from his mid-1960s work "Small Table." This work integrates an almost unrestrained brushwork with bright and vibrant colors, creating a sense of unity that strongly infects the viewer with emotion. The painting boldly borrows techniques from Post-Impressionism and even Fauvism, but his spirited brushwork and strong sense of rhythm make people feel that it is not an oil painting but clearly a freehand brushwork close to literati painting, which undoubtedly brought a strong new atmosphere to the dull art world.

Starting from the mid-1960s, Tie Yang's research on color expressiveness has been unstoppable, and he has produced many excellent works, such as "Fiery Memories" (1976), "Old Apricot Tree" (1979), "Green Hills" (1986), etc. In particular, "A Windless Day" (1977) can be considered one of the best works of this period. The work combines Van Gogh's brushwork with the color characteristics of Fauvism. The color relationships in the painting are clear, with harmony in the contrast of colors, the colors are bright but not garish and full of a sense of order, the colors are exaggerated but not lost in truth; the brushwork is relaxed and unrestrained, but upon close inspection, the brushstrokes are orderly and not chaotic. It should be said that the works of this period have reached a relatively mature level, but they have not yet truly established their own painting language system.

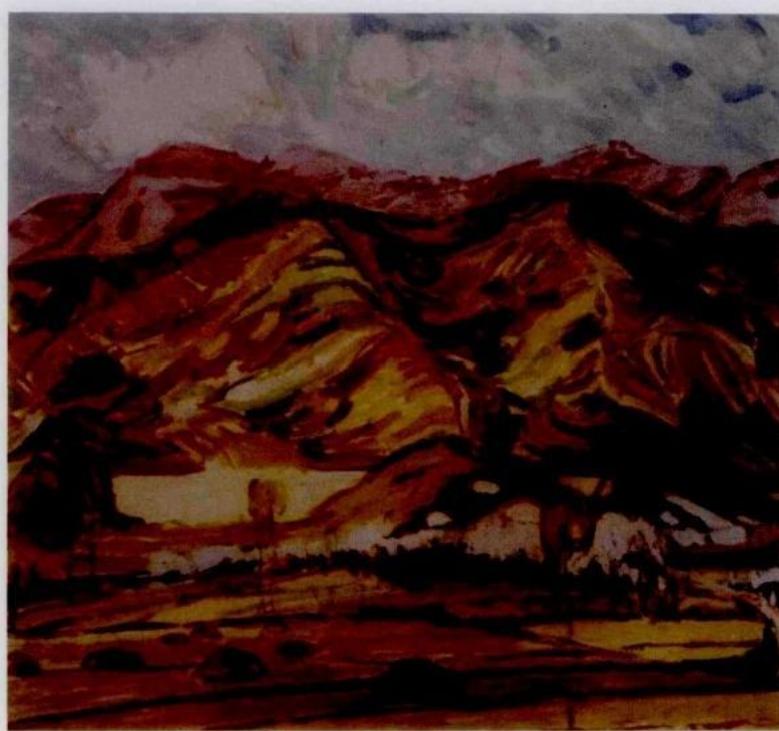


Figure 2 "A Windless Day", 1977

Intense and passionate expression brings Tie Yang's works closer to Western Expressionism, but he does not stop there. He also has a side of tranquil contemplation, which is reflected in the paintings through rigorous study of formal and compositional beauty. This creative consciousness can be seen in the work "Spring Breeze" (1977). Above the low and narrow horizon is a large area of sky, covered by rows and clusters of clouds. The clouds stretch from far to near, with a strong sense of perspective. The white

clouds echo the narrow, long river on the ground, creating a distinct black-and-white image with a dense and sparse arrangement, scattered yet orderly. The summarizing and outlining painting technique makes the image highly formal and aesthetically pleasing. It is clear that the works of this period were influenced by Western formal aesthetic views, with a meticulous layout of various painting language elements, making the image more rigorous and enduring than before. He was also influenced by Bell's formalist theory and Fry's plane art theory. In addition, the influence from painters like Cézanne and domestic peers such as Wu Guanzhong was not small, leading to the creation of a large number of excellent works. This creative characteristic continued into the 1990s. Works such as "Roof" (1979), "Portrait of a Young Girl" (1983), "Ancient Porcelain Vase" (1984), "Lilac and White Lilac" (1985), "High Tide" (1986), "Low Tide" (1986), "Poplars in Bloom" (1987), "Small Island" (1987), "The Moon Rises" (1987), "Love of Trees" (1989), and still lifes like "Red Flowers and Yellow Pears" (1990), "Environment with a Brush" (1990), etc., are all representative of this period. In the study of formal and compositional beauty, Tie Yang never approached it in a singular, fragmented, or mechanical way, nor did he fall into the quagmire of formalism—for form's sake. He always managed to express genuine emotions, placing the expression of true feelings first and integrating formal and compositional beauty within Expressionism. Works such as "Song of the Trees" (1988), "Dream of the Trees" (1989), and "Qingming" (1989) emphasize the formal and compositional beauty of the subject while further strengthening the artist's subjective feelings, thus approaching the edge of abstraction. This abstraction is neither the rational abstraction of Mondrian nor the arbitrary emotional venting of Pollock, but rather an abstract beauty as Mr. Wu Guanzhong said, "the kite does not break the line."

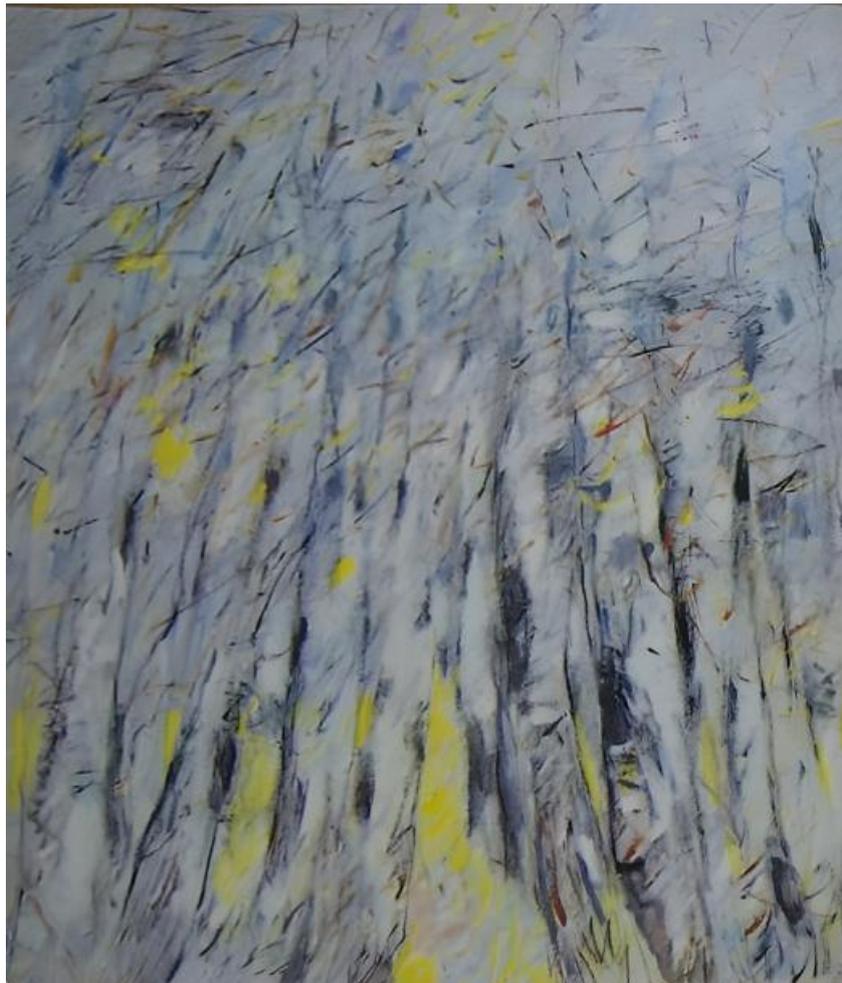


Figure 3 "Dream of the Tree", 1989

In some of his works, Tie Yang intentionally enhances the atmosphere and emotion of the painting, while gradually receding the beauty of formal composition to the background, thus bringing the image closer to abstract expression. Such works include "White Night" (1989), "Ruyi Ridge" (1990), and "Northern Impression" (1990), among others.

## 5. The comprehensive imagist period

Entering the 1990s, Tie Yang's artistic goals became more defined and mature. He mainly explored from two aspects:

Firstly, based on the local folk culture he was familiar with, he created a series of works, such as the "Kang Head Series," "Cornfield Series," and "Daughter of the River Series." These works, while drawing on Western Expressionist theories and techniques, highlight the beauty of local folk and regional characteristics. The works feature concise and powerful brushwork, rich and intense colors, full and substantial character images, filled with the original simplicity and beauty, and possess a strong symbolic meaning and artistic appeal.

Secondly, starting from the regional landscapes he knew well, he further explored unique individual language expression forms, such as the "Wild Three Slope Landscape Series." As Tie Yang's thoughts and aesthetic views matured, his works presented a more imaginative pictorial effect. This imaginative picture is not only distant from Western Expressionism but also not entirely equivalent to Chinese freehand ink painting. Tie Yang appreciates both the spirit of freehand brushwork in traditional Chinese painting and the grandeur and rigorous rationality of Western classical painting. He also has a special fondness for modern painting since Impressionism in the West, especially his love for color is profound, but he can integrate these elements without being obsessed with any one of them. Works such as his "Rhythm of the Mountain Series" and "Rhythm of Autumn Series" fully reflect his aesthetic view. Compared with his previous works, these works use brushwork that is more free and candid, with the momentum of Shi Tao's "searching for strange peaks to make drafts." The colors are gorgeous and composed, full and rich. The seemingly scattered brushstrokes and color dots actually have a sense of tension and relaxation, density and sparsity, clear black and white, and strict order, possessing an internal formal aesthetic feeling, integrating Expressionism, Formalism, and the spirit of freehand brushwork, thus approaching the ancients' free state of "unrestrained spirit."

In terms of aesthetic understanding, Tie Yang has further insights. He believes that the essence of art is interconnected and ultimately a product of the mind and emotions. Collisions with the mind do not require national borders and races as intermediaries. It is precisely this view that allows Tie Yang to let go of all burdens, neither narrowly understanding the "nationalization of oil painting" nor nihilistically worshipping Western modernism. Instead, he insists on observing this familiar world with his own mind and sincerely expressing his emotions. He believes that it is natural for a painter to express emotions, always looking for the best fit, not innovating for the sake of innovation.

From the analysis of Tie Yang's works above, we can at least derive four insights:

### 5.1. Life is forever the source that ignites the light of art

Whether it is the early landscapes, still lifes, and figure works, or the more recent "Cornfield Series," "Kang Head Series," "Steamed Bun Series," "Red Cabinet Series," and "Wild Three Slope Landscape Series," we can all feel the passion Tie Yang has for life and his unconditional devotion to nature. As Mr. Feng Jicai commented, Tie Yang's paintings contain no earth-shattering elements, no artificially subversive concepts, no unprecedented materials, no ingeniously contrived technicalities, and no deliberate visual shocks. For decades, he has hardly changed his subjects of painting, showing an inexhaustible enthusiasm and even passion for nature and the life that is in harmony with it. The essence of Tie Yang's painting is to confront life directly.

### 5.2. The fundamental purpose of art is the expression of emotion, a form of self-exploration

Tie Yang believes that the infection of art on people is merely through the depiction of subjects, whether they be landscapes, still lifes, human bodies, or birds and beasts. The German Expressionist painter Beckmann also shared a similar view, stating that the most important elements in art always originate from

the deepest emotions, a kind of mysterious existence. The expression of self is a need of all true spirit, and this self is what artists have always pursued in life and art. Excellent works in history have never moved people by being novel or bizarre, but by being emotional. Understanding this grasps the essence of art. The beauty conveyed by Tie Yang's works—such as the beauty of simplicity, innocence, and masculinity, the tranquility amidst grandeur, the gentleness within wildness, the subtlety amidst boldness, the praise of humanity, and the passion of a life that beats and burns—make all techniques pale in comparison.

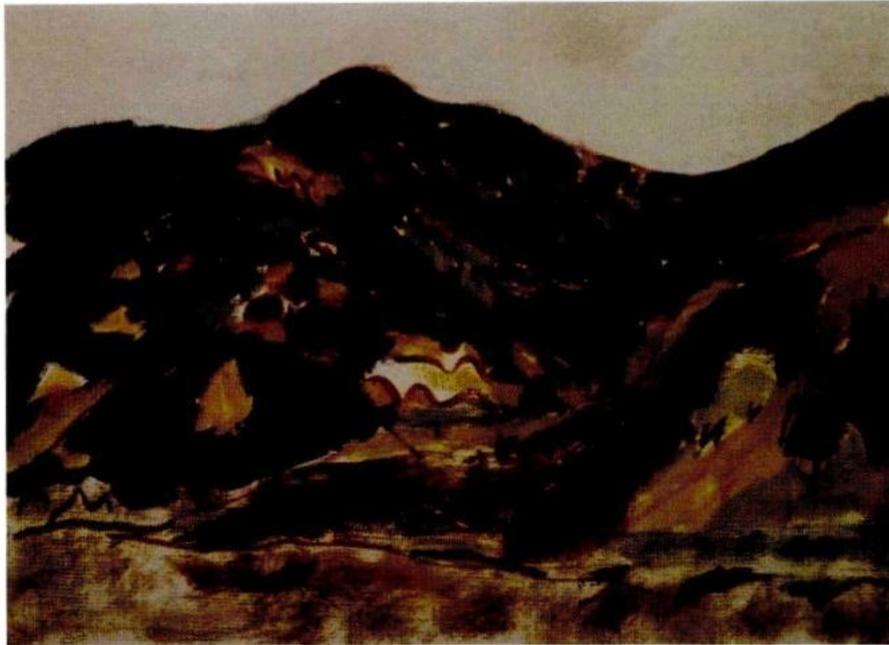


Figure 4 "Rhythm of Autumn" No. 9, 2006

### 5.3. Art should express the national spirit

Although oil painting is an imported art form, it has been officially introduced to China for more than a century and has become an indispensable part of our country's art. It has taken root and grown into a towering tree on the soil of China. While achieving certain accomplishments, we should continue to actively absorb the essence of Western oil painting language expression and strive to explore oil painting works that can express the Chinese national spirit. Tie Yang is such a painter; he is never satisfied with merely drawing on the techniques and styles of various schools after Western Impressionism. Instead, he inclusively absorbs the spirit of Western classical painting as well as the essence of Chinese freehand brushwork art. He never understands "the nationalization of oil painting" in a narrow sense but places the pursuit of expressing the Chinese national spirit first. He believes that as a Chinese oil painter, one should strive to express the national spirit. Tie Yang's pursuit of expressing the Chinese national spirit is not "formal" or "borrowed," but based on his own genuine feelings, and he believes that this is the only way to truly paint works with the Chinese spirit.

### 5.4. Establish and perfect the language of painting

For a painter, the search for and establishment of a unique painting language is an eternal pursuit. After all, painting is a visual art; even the best concepts and the newest feelings need to be conveyed through the canvas. One of the most important factors in measuring a painter's maturity is to examine whether their painting language is mature. Techniques naturally serve the concept, as Wu Guanzhong emphasized, that brush and ink techniques are servants, serving the image and thought. However, isolated techniques almost do not exist; the perfection of skills, or rather, the language of painting, is indeed necessary and essential, a question that any painter must face directly. Throughout his life, Tie Yang has been constantly conveying

his aesthetic concepts to the audience, which is also a process of continuously purifying and perfecting his painting language. This point is always worth our attention and learning.

## **6. Conclusion**

Tie Yang's oil paintings are a valuable asset in the history of modern Chinese art. His creative journey can be divided into four periods: the Gray Tone period, the Aesthetic Lyrical period, the Expressionist period, and the Comprehensive Imagist period. Each period reflects Tie Yang's profound understanding of art and his spirit of continuous exploration. His works not only showcase a unique painting language style but also demonstrate in-depth research into color, form, and emotional expression. Tie Yang's artistic practice tells us that art is a natural expression of emotion, a deep comprehension of life and nature, and also an expression of national spirit and the continuous pursuit and refinement of painting language. Through his paintings, we can feel the power and beauty of art, as well as the artist's profound exploration of self and the world.