Image-Text relations in hibiscus and golden pheasant and theme generation

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Abstract: Hibiscus and Golden Pheasant is not only of exceptional artistic value but also an important work in the development of Chinese poetry-painting integration. As an imperial inscription by Emperor Hui zong of Song, the painting exhibits a unique relationship between poetry and painting: the inscribed poem serves both as a marker of possession and as an interpretation of the painting's theme, differing from the integrated creative relationship in literati painting paradigms. In appreciating this work, image and text perform distinct functions—the visual image presents forms without explaining artistic intention, while text, as the carrier of ideas, holds privileged discursive power in translating image into thought. Thus, Emperor Hui zong 's inscribed poem objectively determines the painting's theme; the colophon serves as both interpreter and definer of the painting, with the tension between the two enhancing the work's artistic expressiveness.

Keywords: Hibiscus and Golden Pheasant, image-text relationship, painting theme, Emperor Hui zong of Song

1. Introduction

Hibiscus and Golden Pheasant is an imperial inscription by Emperor Huizong of the Northern Song dynasty (painted by another artist, inscribed by the emperor), representing a key work in the critical period of Chinese poetry-painting integration. The fusion of Chinese poetry and painting can be divided into two stages: the unconscious era (Warring States to Tang dynasty), where image and text coexisted explanatorily with text subordinate to image; and the conscious era (from Five Dynasties and Northern Song onward), emphasizing interactive relationships in creation and aesthetics. With his mastery of poetry, calligraphy, and painting, Emperor Huizong pioneered a unique form integrating these three arts, and Hibiscus and Golden Pheasant stands as an important exemplar of this transition, demonstrating the confirmatory function of text in defining pictorial themes during the Northern Song period.

2. Description of image-text form in hibiscus and golden pheasant

Based on existing authentication results, Hibiscus and Golden Pheasant is undoubtedly an imperial inscription by Emperor Huizong of Song, with consistent judgments from multiple sources. The work is a colored painting on silk, measuring 81.4 cm in length and 54 cm in width, currently housed in the Palace Museum, Beijing. The composition features a golden pheasant, hibiscus flowers, chrysanthemums, and butterflies. The hibiscus branches extend from the middle left toward the upper right and lower right; the golden pheasant stands on the lower right branch, gazing upward at two fluttering butterflies. Four chrysanthemums in the lower left corner grow toward the upper right.

Compositionally, the relatively blank right side provides space for the inscription. Emperor Huizong's poem reads: "Autumn's vigor defies frost's abundance, / Crested crown, brocade-feathered fowl. / Known to possess all five virtues, / More ease than ducks and herons." The lower right bears the signature "Composed and written at the Xuanhe Hall," along with his cipher and the "Imperial Calligraphy" seal (Figure 1). In terms of subject matter, this is a typical academy painting; Song dynasty academy works predominantly featured ornamental flowers and rare birds, such as hibiscus, wintersweet, crabapple, plum blossoms, strange rocks, and various exotic fowl.

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Figure 1

Overall, the work is relatively harmonious, with appropriate color handling and management of negative space. However, the signature positioned beneath the butterflies slightly congests the left side, and due to imperfect spatial control, the final line of the inscribed poem conflicts somewhat with the butterflies, causing the text to sit slightly lower than the preceding lines—likely because the painting and inscription were executed by different hands, resulting in slight spatial inconsistency.

Unlike Emperor Huizong's other works, this painting features an inscription that intrudes into the pictorial space. This differs from works such as Auspicious Dragon Rock and Crane Painting, where clear boundaries exist between the painted area and the colophon. "Poems on painting from the Northern Song, like painting colophons, were generally written at the end or beginning of the scroll rather than in the blank spaces of the composition"[5]. In Hibiscus and Golden Pheasant, the inscribed poem merges with the image, participating in and constituting the work's visual form. This is among the earliest extant representative works integrating poetry, calligraphy, and painting, thus holding significant value in the history of poetry-painting fusion.

Before Emperor Huizong, although the relationship between poetry and painting was discussed, such discussions focused primarily on aesthetic sensibility; only in the Northern Song, particularly during Emperor Huizong's reign, was the complete fusion of poetic sensibility and visual form truly achieved. It should be noted that Auspicious Dragon Rock and Crane Painting are horizontal compositions, whereas Hibiscus and Golden Pheasant is vertical. The spatial extension of horizontal paintings differs from vertical works, which may account for the different placement of inscriptions. However, objectively speaking, Hibiscus and Golden Pheasant indeed forms a tightly integrated unity of painting and text, with the inscribed characters constituting a major component of the composition—either enriching or disrupting the pictorial effect during appreciation. This aligns with the typical literati painting format that emerged after the Yuan dynasty, though this consistency does not stem from subjective creative intention.

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3. Analysis of the inscribed poem in hibiscus and golden pheasant

Emperor Huizong's poem on Hibiscus and Golden Pheasant reads: "Autumn's vigor defies frost's abundance, / Crested crown, brocade-feathered fowl. / Known to possess all five virtues, / More ease than ducks and herons." The colophon's content concerns neither the painting's formal qualities—composition, modeling, nor brushwork—nor documents the work's creation; rather, it interprets the subject's symbolic meaning, comparing the golden pheasant to the "five virtues" in the line "Known to possess all five virtues, more ease than ducks and herons."

The allusion of using a fowl to represent the "five virtues" originates from Han Shi Wai Zhuan (Exoteric Commentary on the Han Classic of Songs): "Has Your Majesty not seen the fowl? The crown upon its head signifies culture; the spur upon its foot signifies martial prowess; daring to fight when enemies approach signifies courage; calling companions when finding food signifies benevolence; keeping watch without missing the hour signifies trustworthiness. Though the fowl possesses these five virtues, Your Majesty still boils and eats it daily—why?" This dialogue between minister and ruler depicts the situation of "Tian Rao serving Duke Ai of Lu without recognition," after which "Tian Rao left Lu for Yan." Tian Rao considered himself exceptionally capable yet unappreciated, like the virtuous fowl reduced merely to food.

However, Emperor Huizong's use of the "five virtues" to describe the golden pheasant differs fundamentally from Tian Rao's usage. Tian Rao's intention focused on explaining "though the fowl possesses these five virtues, Your Majesty still boils and eats it daily"—employing praise to introduce criticism. Emperor Huizong, conversely, states "Known to possess all five virtues," seemingly boasting of his own ability to recognize worthy ministers and his wisdom and perspicacity. The final line, "More ease than ducks and herons," reveals the poem's emotional attitude.

Emperor Huizong perceived a causal relationship between the "five virtues" and ease: once recognized by the ruler, those possessing the five virtues could live in comfort. This represents the emperor's didactic message to his ministers, promising the inevitability of prosperity for worthy officials and boasting of his talent for recognizing and employing capable men—though history would prove otherwise. Thus, Emperor Huizong's interpretation from his own perspective was certainly not the original creator's intention; a mere court painter would never dare claim "Known to possess all five virtues, more ease than ducks and herons." Yet because the creator revealed no creative intention, and no documentary evidence points to the author or their purpose, Emperor Huizong's inscribed poem acquired greater authority, successfully "appropriating" the discursive power over this painting.

4. Role & Meaning of the poem on hibiscus and golden pheasant

Hibiscus and Golden Pheasant connects three parties: the work's creator, its possessor (Emperor Huizong), and viewers. Originally, Emperor Huizong should have occupied the same position as ordinary viewers; however, because the original creator left an open space (without any explanatory text), Emperor Huizong participated in the creation to some extent, acquiring a special identity—we may consider him the "second author" of this work.

Emperor Huizong became the "second author" due to his special relationship with the work. From the work's perspective, his inscription emerged in a tightly connected timeframe with the painting, possibly even simultaneous with the original creation process. From the human perspective, the original creator maintained a dependent relationship with Emperor Huizong, who could influence the academy painter's work regarding timing, location, subject, and form. Thus, considering the work's diachronic nature and the people's synchronic relationship, Emperor Huizong fully qualifies as the "second author." More importantly, the work may have been created according to Emperor Huizong's conceptualization, leading us to habitually view it as a complete work.

Emperor Huizong's practice of inscribing paintings stemmed from personal hobby and direct participation in calligraphy and painting. Similarly, the Qianlong Emperor enjoyed adding colophons to famous historical works; however, neither the diachronic nor synchronic conditions were met, so we never consider Qianlong a "second author"—merely an appreciator with special status. Qianlong certainly intended to "possess" works, but his possession was material; his poetic inscriptions proved his disposal

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rights rather than defining power over the work. Emperor Huizong's possession encompassed both material and spiritual dimensions—though not his original intention, it effectively functioned as such.

If paintings can frequently produce "second authors" like Emperor Huizong, then creators' own interpretations become crucial. Particularly in "literati painting," where lack of realistic representation easily obscures themes, actively explaining creative motivation effectively prevents arbitrary usurpation by "second authors," while generating artistic interest through image-text displacement. When interpreting creative intentions to reconstruct creative contexts, text proves more persuasive than pictorial content. For example, in Qi Baishi' s famous Frog Sounds Ten Miles from the Mountain Spring, the image alone shows merely landscape and tadpoles; formally, the interaction between mountains and tadpoles often violates visual requirements. Yet in its specific creative context, it succeeds remarkably, expressing the theme with unexpected novelty—using distant-swimming tadpoles to imply frog sounds.

Usually, text postdates the image; however, because textual narrative clarity exceeds painting, text provides an angle for appreciation and criticism, with the matching between painting and text becoming important to viewing. Their displacement precisely generates new interest—excessive convergence or divergence harms artistic expression. Michael Sullivan suggested that colophons extend aesthetic time, but their relationship is not necessarily temporal continuation; often, it represents displacement. Take Xu Wei's ink grapes: removing the text, we might interpret the image through pomegranate symbolism (progeny abundance) rather than connecting to the "fallen old man's" pearls cast into wild vines. Image text and painting are not unified semantic signs, not continuously extended, but displaced semantic overlays—artistic value enhances through this displacement.

In Hibiscus and Golden Pheasant, though Emperor Huizong's poem and pictorial image are not in displacement, the poem's five virtues represent spiritual extension of the pheasant image, strongly guiding viewers' subsequent perception of the pheasant.

5. Theme as discourse: Image-to-idea translation

From the poetry-painting relationship perspective, the poem in Hibiscus and Golden Pheasant seems loosely connected to the painting; both interpret the golden pheasant at different levels. The painting depicts the pheasant and hibiscus through visual forms, with no explicit purpose implied. The work may be a life sketch, a copy of another work, or an imagined scene—all possibilities indicating that painting does not explain or record itself, but only explains what is depicted: the pheasant, hibiscus, and other elements receive interpretation through painting.

What can explain and record painting is text; however, text may also bypass painting to target objects within it—clearly this poem represents the latter case, where painting is circumvented and only the pheasant receives interpretation. Painted scenes become textual symbols in poetry: the chrysanthemums in Hibiscus and Golden Pheasant transform into the first line's "Autumn's vigor defies frost's abundance," a seasonal suggestive symbol. Upon this foundation, textual imagery generates further suggestions—for instance, chrysanthemums implying autumn, and Chinese literati's "lamenting autumn" tradition originating with Qu Yuan making autumn a favored poetic season. Factors like withering, harvest, and temperature shifts become symbols of human character, allowing different readers diverse decodings, with any decoding capable of further jumps—unlike visual symbols.

In paintings, we focus more on visually observable chrysanthemum forms, colors, and growth; associations more easily point to concrete images (such as chrysanthemums from my home or recent experience) rather than abstract meanings and symbolic systems. Evidently, translating pictorial imagery into textual imagery facilitates entry into symbolic interpretation systems, where linguistic decoding and jumps offer readers greater autonomy and richness than painted images. In Hibiscus and Golden Pheasant, only the golden pheasant overlaps between inscribed poem and painting; hibiscus, chrysanthemums, and butterflies are omitted from the poem. For Emperor Huizong's poem, whether butterflies, bees, or miscellaneous insects appear in the upper right affects theme expression not at all—or rather, they fall outside the poem's descriptive scope. As long as hibiscus and golden pheasant appear on the painting, his poetic content likely remains unchanged. Yet for painting, all visible images matter; what ruins a work is not merely misplaced prominent elements like pheasant, hibiscus, mountain birds, or wintersweet—a single butterfly with distorted form, chaotic color, or vague brushwork reduces the entire work to waste paper.

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Thus, poems on painting focus on visually arresting images, often ignoring embellishments and backgrounds. However, in painting creation itself, every line, object form, and color rendering holds equal visual importance. Even in expressing the same artistic image, poetry and painting differ markedly. For example, depicting someone's beautiful eyes through both text and image: text can describe directly, employing contrast, metaphor, or exaggeration, completely omitting nose, ears, or hair. Yet image representation requires other facial features; painting only eyes cannot complete the subject. Gu Kaizhi's statement that "capturing the spirit in portraiture lies only in the eyes" emphasizes key elements' importance, yet we see no portrait with incomplete features—errors in depicting nose or mouth similarly undermine the theme (eyes). This means text cannot waste words, but painting can have "waste," coexisting as long as maintaining equivalent artistic standards with the theme. Especially in inscribed poems, poetry concerns only expressing the painting's theme, not embellishments, since painting's decorative elements exist to enrich and balance vision, holding limited value in theme expression.

Although Hibiscus and Golden Pheasant was created by two individuals, in the process of appreciation we habitually view it as a complete whole. While viewing the image is influenced by composition and modeling, visual disruption from background chrysanthemums and butterflies equals that from the main subjects—pheasant and hibiscus. In understanding the painting, image and text form a mutually interpretive relationship. Colophon text typically postdates the painting, recording and explaining to some degree the painting's content and context. Yet in this process, text possesses full initiative, capable of autonomously selecting or ignoring images within the painting. In meaning conveyance, the colophon has precise expressive capacity, acquiring absolute discursive power over the painting's theme. Through his inscribed poem, Emperor Huizong not only declared possession of Hibiscus and Golden Pheasant, but also defined the work's theme like the original creator. This integrated form of poetry, calligraphy, and painting became a distinctive characteristic of Chinese art.

6. Conclusion

This paper takes Emperor Huizong's Hibiscus and Golden Pheasant as its research subject, examining the special form of poetry-painting integration and the image-text relationship during the Northern Song period. The article notes that, as an imperial inscription, Hibiscus and Golden Pheasant exhibits a unique poetry-painting relationship: Emperor Huizong's inscribed poem serves both as a marker of material and spiritual possession of the work, and through interpreting the golden pheasant as a "five virtues" fowl, establishes the painting's thematic meaning—making the emperor the "second author" of the work. Unlike the conscious integration of poetry and painting in literati creation, this painting demonstrates a functional division where image presents form and text interprets intention—the visual image displays objects without stating purpose, while text occupies a privileged discursive position in translating image into thought, capable of selectively ignoring pictorial elements while extending meaning through symbolic systems. This tension between image and text establishes the colophon's definitional power over the painting's theme while enhancing artistic expressiveness through semantic displacement, serving as an important example in the evolution of Chinese poetry-painting integration from practical explanation toward aesthetic interaction.

7. References

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