

# Reunderstanding Chinese landscape oil painting

Luo Na<sup>1, a, \*</sup>, Zhao Yafeng<sup>1, b</sup>,

<sup>1</sup>Chinese Academy of Art Guoyi City Design Art Research Institute, Room 303, No. 6899 Wentao Road, Puyan Street, Binjiang District, Hangzhou City, Zhejiang Province, 310052, China  
a.luona\_2024\_@163.com, b.yafeng\_zhao\_052104@sina.com

\*Corresponding Author

**Abstract:** This paper systematically elaborates on the return of the "freehand expression" spirit in Chinese landscape oil painting within the context of cultural consciousness and artistic innovation. First, starting from the philosophical foundation of "expressing the mind and conveying meaning" in traditional Chinese painting, it points out that "freehand expression" originates from Zhuangzi and Zen culture, pursuing the realm of "harmony between heaven and humanity." It gradually integrates with Western oil painting techniques to form a unique indigenous painting language. Second, the article argues for the importance of "ordered freehand expression" as the essence of Chinese landscape oil painting creation, emphasizing that art must follow the progressive order of "truth, goodness, and beauty" and achieve spiritual and cultural return on the basis of respecting public aesthetic norms. Furthermore, by analyzing the relationship between "art" and "technique," it reveals the evolutionary path of painting from instinctive spontaneity to rational construction, noting that the spirit of freehand expression deepens with the changes of the times, ultimately guiding modern artists in exploring inner spirituality and individual experience. Finally, the article reviews the century-long development of Chinese oil painting, proposing that a nationalized and localized path of freehand expression is an inevitable choice for Chinese landscape oil painting to establish its own style and return to cultural tradition, with its ultimate goal point to the Eastern philosophical realm of harmony between humanity and nature.

**Keywords:** Chinese landscape oil painting, spirit of freehand expression, Zhuangzi and Zen culture, harmony between heaven and humanity

## 1. Introduction

In China, traditional Chinese painting has a long history and profound heritage. Compared to Western oil painting, traditional Chinese painting centers on "expressing the heart and capturing the essence," differing from the scientific realism foundational to Western oil painting. With its rich cultural background and embedded philosophical concepts, it stands as a unique phenomenon in the history of world art.

## 2. Freehand expression as an important method and pursuit in Chinese painting

The ultimate formation of "freehand expression" originates from China's millennia-old "Zhuangzi and Zen culture." This culture is based on the philosophical thought of the "Dao," with the unity of the Dao and nature as its essence—the Dao is an entity, elusive and intangible, yet within its vagueness lies substance, and within its intangibility lies form. The "Dao" is a shape without form, an image without physical substance. Against the backdrop of "Zhuangzi and Zen culture," the "freehand expression" painting method emerged, characterized by "form without physical substance." This approach does not prioritize meticulous or precise brushwork but instead focuses on capturing the spirit and essence of the subject, expressing the painter's emotions and sentiments, ultimately achieving the artistic realm of "harmony between heaven and humanity." Influenced by the ideas of "Zhuangzi and Zen culture" and "harmony between heaven and humanity," the concept of "freehand expression" pursues the ultimate goal of this unity. "Freehand expression" has extended into all aspects of Chinese culture and art. After Western oil painting was introduced to China, the indigenous Chinese culture of "freehand expression," along with traditional Daoist spirit, intermingled with foreign influences, giving rise to a unique oil painting style that integrates Eastern and Western artistic approaches. In the field of landscape oil painting, the characteristic of "expressing emotions through objects" and "embedding emotions in objects" gradually took shape. Ultimately, through the collective efforts of generations of artists, Chinese landscape oil painting—blending Chinese "freehand

expression" thought with Western aesthetic concepts—has become a distinctive artistic language rooted in China's vast cultural heritage and innovative artistic ideals.

### **3. What is "expressed" is the "artistic conception" of the landscape**

It is neither a mere reproduction of the objective world nor a purely subjective expression of emotion. Instead, it is the fusion of the objective and the subjective, the blending of the object and the self, from which the "artistic conception" arises. In freehand expression, what is "expressed" may be a patch of earth, a tree, or a landscape, yet it conveys a mood, an attitude, and an emotion—this is the true essence of "meaning." During the act of "expression," it must be imbued with a consciousness of the "Dao," envisioning one's subjective "imagery" so that emotion flows into the artwork and the artwork expresses emotion... This is the substantive essence of the "spirit of freehand expression." For Chinese landscape oil painting, orderly freehand expression represents a return to the essence of its creation.

Oil painting creation inevitably follows the progressive order from "truth" to "goodness" and then to "beauty." Undoubtedly, for any form of art, these three principles remain eternal themes.

#### **3.1. The authenticity of creation**

It is a fusion and unity of the truth of real life and the truth of the painter's spiritual life. It does not rely on subjective arbitrariness, nor does it linger on depicting the superficial, individual, or accidental phenomena of reality.

#### **3.2. The "Goodness" in creation**

It must be a form of goodness that is non-particular, not rooted in personal or private experience, and free from interpretive ambiguity or incomprehensibility. This "goodness" is neither mysterious nor uncertain, nor is it inexplicably celebrated. Rather, it is publicly acknowledged and aligned with the "goodness" that adheres to social order.

#### **3.3. Return and order: The aesthetic foundation of landscape oil painting**

To interpret true beauty, it is essential to follow the widely accepted aesthetic rules of society, rather than blindly pursuing so-called "beauty" without a foundation. In the creation of landscape oil painting, adhering to these orders is even more crucial to gradually achieve the "return of beauty," "spiritual return," and "cultural return." A mature artist's work inevitably follows an order, and Chinese landscape oil painters, in particular, should vigorously advocate for the principle of orderly freehand expression in their creative endeavors.

## **4. From instinct to reason: Art as base, technique as way**

In the phrase "art," "yi" (art) precedes "shu" (technique), with "yi" serving as the foundation of "shu," and "shu" being the extension of "yi." The "Annotations to Shuowen Jiezi" explains: "Shu refers to the paths within a city. A city is akin to a state, and by extension, it means skill." The so-called "skill" is defined as "ingenuity. The Ministry of Works states: ingenuity is skill." From this, it is clear that the original meaning of "shu" is a path—a result of human transformation of nature, an outcome of human subjective initiative, bearing clear traces of human creation. Later, it extended to mean technique, where skill equates to ingenuity, similarly representing the full exertion of human subjective initiative to create new things. If "yi" involves more the role of human instinct, then "shu" entails the conscious use of subjective initiative to create and apply rules, with greater participation of rational thinking. For painters, as Pollock, regarded as an enlightenment figure of postmodern art, stated, a painter must be able to depict spontaneous and natural states. This idea resonates with the concept of "freehand expression" in traditional Chinese painting.

## **5. The evolution of freehand expression: From Instinct to Introspection**

Humanity's earliest painting activities were innocent, natural, and spontaneous, requiring no specialized training or instruction, with no distinction between amateur and professional painters. It was only after art became a specialized profession that standards for painting as an art form emerged. As times have evolved,

each era, shaped by its history, culture, and political developments, has developed its own distinct temporal order. Similarly, the concept of "freehand expression" in traditional Chinese painting has continuously updated the content and depth of its order in response to the progression of time. The development of modern civilization has fundamentally altered human sensory experiences, with the pace of change accelerating and the volume of information people receive expanding exponentially. Under the influence of values that emphasize individuality, emotional richness, and self-expression, artists increasingly prioritize genuine "spiritual beauty" and "inner information." This reflects the essence of freehand expression, which combines external objects with inner experiences, moving beyond the mere representation of reality.

## 6. Roots and creation: The freehand path of Chinese landscape oil painting

Since its introduction to China in the early 20th century, oil painting has undergone conflicts of concepts and transformations in techniques, evolving from complete Westernization and eclecticism to Sino-Western integration, and from realism and expressionism to a path of nationalization, traversing a challenging journey. Chinese oil painting has consistently faced two dilemmas: first, how to approach oil painting—whether to critique or embrace it; and second, how to leverage the profound and extensive Chinese culture. History has proven that China's five-thousand-year civilization has forged a deeply rooted Chinese culture, making its cultural distinctiveness irreplaceable, regardless of the extent of appropriation, adaptation of foreign elements, or Sino-Western fusion. Thus, the freehand expression with Chinese characteristics represents the essence of Chinese landscape oil painting. As the saying goes, "what is national is global." There is no need to copy or imitate Western postmodernist concepts and trends. Instead, we can draw from and absorb all valuable ideological and technical achievements, transforming them into an effective local discourse to contribute to oil painting creation. For Chinese landscape oil painting to develop its own characteristics and style and to genuinely return to its native cultural traditions, pursuing an orderly path of freehand expression is an inevitable choice.

## 7. Conclusion

An increasing number of Chinese artists are beginning to explore how to reconstruct Chinese art and break free from the constraints of Western artistic influence. In fact, this represents the grand return of Chinese oil painting. In the realm of landscape oil painting, the "unity" of humanity and nature, the "harmony" between humans and the natural world, and the genuine embodiment of Chinese Daoist and Zen philosophies constitute the ultimate direction for Chinese art.



Figure 1: Snow No. 3 by Wang Haijun, 40cm × 80cm, 2014



Figure 2: My Heart in the Highlands by Wang Haijun, 97cm × 146cm, 2015



Figure 3: Autumn by the River by Wang Haijun, 60cm × 100cm, 2015



Figure 4: Rainforest Narrative by Wang Haijun, 100cm × 100cm, 2013