

# On the changes of flower and bird painting in the 20th century and contemporary thinking

**Jingxian Chen**

Anhui University of Finance and Economics, Bengbu 233030, China

Email: 840632195@qq.com

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## Abstract

Flower and bird painting in the 20th century has undergone a magnificent modernization transformation. From the innovation of pioneers such as Wu Changshuo and Qi Baishi, to the pursuit of "Chinese painting under socialism" after the founding of new China, and to the in-depth exchange of Chinese and Western culture after the reform and opening up, flower and bird painting has adhered to the tradition and constantly integrated new elements to form a unique artistic style. This change is not only reflected in the innovation of painting techniques and themes, but also reflects the transformation of cultural concepts and aesthetic values. Looking forward to the future, the creation of flower and bird painting should continue to draw inspiration from nature, inherit the tradition and be brave in innovation, pay attention to the development of the times and the evolution of modern aesthetics, and constantly expand the artistic form and connotation. Through continuous exploration and practice, flower and bird painting will glow with more brilliant glory in the new era and become an important part of Chinese excellent traditional culture.

## Keywords

Flower and bird painting; Change; History of painting

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## 1. A basic summary of the changes of flower and bird painting in the 20th century

In the 20th century, this magnificent century witnessed the profound changes in the pattern of human society, the huge transformation of politics, economy and culture, and also profoundly affected the evolution of painting art. For Chinese painters, this is an era full of challenges and opportunities. With the progress of the times, people are constantly questioning the tradition. However, in decades of exploration and practice, they have gradually realized that only when they are deeply rooted in the soil of national culture, can artistic works radiate real value and significance. Since the reform and opening up, the research on the sense of form has become the focus of painting research, which has triggered another in-depth exchange between Chinese and Western culture in the field of art.

Looking back at the early 20th century and before liberation, a group of pioneers who were brave in reform emerged in the painting world. With his unique artistic technique, Wu Changshuo integrated calligraphy strokes into traditional Chinese painting, laying a solid foundation for the modernization of freehand flower and bird painting. His flower and bird paintings not only inherit the traditional theme, but also integrate his own unique artistic understanding and emotional expression, showing the new atmosphere of art in the new era. On the basis of inheriting Wu-Changshuo, Qi Baishi further widened the scope of the subject matter, integrated the ordinary things in life into the picture, and made the work closer to reality and full of life. Its artistic style not only embodies the essence of traditional Chinese literati painting, but also integrates modern painting elements, forming a unique artistic style of painting.

After the founding of new China, under the guidance of the theme of "Chinese painting under socialism", traditional painters have explored how to create works that meet the requirements of the times on the basis of inheriting the tradition. Qi Baishi's long live the motherland, Zhang Shuqi's picture of pigeons, and Pan Tianshou's Yandang Mountain flowers are all outstanding representatives under this theme. These works not only show the charm of traditional Chinese painting, but also integrate the elements of the new era[1], and become the representative of "Red Classics". In addition, many painters grew up in the harsh environment of wartime, and accepted the influence of western aesthetic education ideas in the stage of study, forming a unique artistic style. They are bold in innovation and enterprising, and have made important contributions to promoting the modernity of flower and bird painting.

The evolution of flower and bird painting in the 20th century is not only the collision and integration of eastern and Western cultures, but also the interweaving and transformation of tradition and modernity. Under the influence of the political movement and the revolutionary wave, artists once lost their way, but with the deepening of reform and opening up, the pursuit of modernity and originality of traditional Chinese painting art has become the mainstream again. Many artists continue to explore and innovate in their respective fields, which has promoted the continuous progress of Chinese painting art.

## **2. The historical background of flower and bird painting in the 20th century**

In China at the beginning of the 20th century, the Chinese picture is facing unprecedented challenges and opportunities. Kangyouwei deeply analyzed the root cause of the decline of Chinese painting in the preface to the painting of WanMu thatched cottage. He believed that after literati painting became orthodox[2], the artistic language and schema gradually became rigid, and he despised realism, which led to the decline of art. After the failure of the reform movement of 1898, when Kangyouwei

was in exile in Europe, he said after seeing western realistic oil paintings: "today, we should take the essence of European painting to make up for the shortcomings of our country." [3] Chen Duxiu, on the other hand, put forward a more radical view of "Art Revolution" [4]. He believed that the artistic ideas and inherent patterns of the "four kings" and literati painting must be completely abandoned, and realism in Western painting techniques was introduced, providing a new direction for the development of Chinese painting. Cai Yuanpei promoted the reform of art education through practice, proposed "replacing religion with aesthetic education" and "introducing science into art" [5], and stressed the importance of art development to social progress. One of the remarkable features of this new culture movement is the emergence and development of a negative attitude towards Chinese tradition. It is like a sharp double-edged sword. On the one hand, it fiercely impacts on the old ideas, on the other hand, it actively introduces the advanced ideas of the west, and injects new vitality into the modern transformation of Chinese society.

Traditional Chinese culture, especially Chinese painting, as a treasure of Chinese culture, has always been admired by the world for its profound connotation and unique charm. However, under the impact of the new culture movement, Chinese painting has also ushered in unprecedented challenges and opportunities. Traditional Chinese painting began to be criticized, and people began to reflect on its shortcomings. The introduction of western aesthetic thought provided new ideas for the development of Chinese painting. The concept of Chinese painting is no longer limited to classical aesthetic language, but gradually extended to modern art aesthetics, which not only changed the connotation and value system of traditional Chinese painting, but also shook the dominant position of Chinese painting for hundreds of years.

As a giant in Chinese painting, Xu Beihong not only has profound traditional skills, but also has a broad vision and forward-looking thinking. Xu Beihong explicitly attacked the shortcomings of traditional Chinese painting and proposed improvement methods for it. He advocated a comprehensive transformation of Chinese painting on the basis of inheriting some fine traditions and integrating western aesthetics. This concept of "the best of the ancient methods should be observed, the best should be followed, the poor should be improved, and the insufficient should be added" not only points out the direction for the development of Chinese painting, but also provides valuable reference for later artists [6].

After Xu Beihong, Wu Guanzhong won wide praise for his unique artistic style and profound ideological connotation. In 1979, in the short article "formal beauty of painting" created by Wu Guanzhong, he elaborated his personal opinions on "beauty and beauty", "creation and practice", "personal feelings and style", "ancient and modern, East and west", "artistic conception and Untitled", "the road for beginners". He believed that "formal beauty is a key link in art creation." [7] This article had a far-reaching impact on the art world in the 1980s. In the article, Wu Guanzhong

broke some political requirements attached to Chinese painting, lifted some form constraints of traditional painting, and made Chinese painting more free to express artists' feelings and thoughts. This practice not only provided new ideas for the development of Chinese painting, but also provided important enlightenment for later artists.

In the 1990s, Wu Guanzhong published the article "pen and ink are equal to zero"[8]. In the article, it was mentioned that Wu Guanzhong made an in-depth analysis and Reflection on the concept of pen and ink in traditional Chinese painting. He believes that ink is only a means of painting, not the whole of painting. In painting, it is more important to express the artist's feelings and thoughts, rather than pursuing the fine and complicated pen and ink. This view not only touched the traditional aesthetics of Chinese painting, but also had a far-reaching impact on the overall thinking of modern Chinese painting.

On the path of inheriting and innovating traditional Chinese painting art, these outstanding masters inject a continuous stream of vitality into the transformation and development of Chinese painting with their unique artistic language and profound cultural heritage. They not only achieved breakthrough achievements in artistic expression such as brush and ink techniques and composition forms, but also opened up new horizons in ideological dimensions such as artistic concepts and cultural connotations. It is precisely with the tireless spirit of exploration and innovative courage of these artists that Chinese painting, an ancient art form, can flourish in the contemporary cultural context, maintaining the essence of traditional art while showcasing a modern style that keeps up with the times. Their artistic practice not only enriches the forms of expression of Chinese painting, but also deepens its cultural connotation, making Chinese painting an important carrier to showcase the unique charm of Chinese culture, and demonstrating eternal artistic value and cultural significance in the era of globalization.

### **3. The conceptual change of flower and bird painting in the 20th century**

When discussing the development of flower and bird painting in the 20th century, it is not difficult to find that its evolution is not limited to the innovation of pen and ink skills and formal language, but deeply rooted in the transformation of cultural concepts. Flower and bird painting, as an important part of traditional Chinese painting, is unique in that it not only pursues the beauty of the picture, but also carries rich cultural connotations and profound social implications.

Compared with figure painting and landscape painting, flower and bird painting pays more attention to the fine description and profound understanding of natural objects. Because of its relatively simple object, flower and bird painting has found a more natural balance between pen and ink language and natural image. However, with the changes of the times, the cultural value and aesthetic concept of flower and

bird painting are also evolving.

The value of traditional flower and bird painting is mainly reflected in two aspects: one is the tool used by literati painters to express their emotions and entertain themselves; The second is to serve the ruling class and convey its political intentions and aesthetic concepts. However, in the new era, flower and bird painting needs to get rid of this traditional shackles, integrate into the requirements of socialist art, and show a more modern and profound social value.

Under the artistic standards of the new era, the value of flower and bird painting is more reflected in the profound reflection and criticism of the real society. Through natural objects such as flowers, birds, fish and birds, painters express their profound thinking and humanistic concern for social phenomena. However, how to express the profound social value through these natural objects and how to show the painter's personality charm and emotional attitude has become an important issue faced by the contemporary flower and bird painting creation. The traditional flower and bird painting endows people with emotion and character by means of personification, which reflects the spiritual pursuit and life perception of scholar bureaucrats in traditional Chinese culture. However, with the changes of the times, the themes and techniques of expression of traditional flower and bird painting are gradually ossified, lacking innovation and breakthrough.

In this process, the importance of traditional painting language has become increasingly prominent. The artists expressed their deep understanding and unique views on the theme of traditional flower and bird painting through personalized pen and ink language. They use different pen and ink skills and color matching to create flower and bird paintings with unique style and profound connotation. For example, Xu Wei's "ink grape painting" expresses his resentment of underachieving talent with his wild and uninhibited pen and ink language[9].

Under the influence of WuChangshuo, many artists began to explore the modern transformation of flower and bird painting. They inherited the essence of traditional flower and bird paintings, and integrated the expression techniques and aesthetic concepts of modern art, creating a series of flower and bird paintings with the characteristics of the times and profound connotation. For example, on the basis of inheriting Wu Changshuo's freehand brushwork style of flowers and birds, Wang Gezhen retained his unique style of beauty; Pan Tianshou swept away the listlessness of the painting world at that time with his unique pen and ink language and domineering painting style.

#### **4. Contemporary thinking on the changes of flower and bird painting in the 20th century**

When we explore the evolution of flower and bird painting in the 20th century, it is not difficult to find that this change is not just the change of painting techniques and themes, but the deep cultural transformation and the evolution of aesthetic concepts.

Behind this is the gradual dissolution of the symbolic meaning of traditional culture and the search for new ways of expression and value in the exploration and attempt of artistic language. The process of social modernization has undoubtedly promoted the innovation of aesthetic thought, which makes the traditional art form of flower and bird painting also face the pressure and challenges of transformation.

With its unique cultural connotation and aesthetic value, traditional flower and bird painting carries rich historical information and humanistic emotions. However, in the process of transforming to modern flower and bird painting, flower and bird painters began to try to break through the traditional pen and ink language and pursue personalized performance characteristics. They are no longer satisfied with the theme and composition of traditional flower and bird painting, but look for inspiration from market life and express their true feelings about nature and life with pen and ink. This change has brought about the gradual dilution of the traditional cultural symbols and personality implications, instead of the real description of what we see in life and the direct expression of life feelings.

In the process of exploring new artistic language, flower and bird painters began to pay attention to the essence of natural beauty and the true feelings of life. They improve the expressiveness of pen and ink language by hiding their subjective feelings, making the picture more vivid, natural and true. This true description of nature and life not only meets the needs of Modernist Aesthetics, but also reflects the artist's deep understanding and perception of nature and life.

With the continuous development of society and the continuous evolution of modern aesthetic thought[10], flower and bird painting is also facing new opportunities and challenges. On the one hand, with the continuous change and diversification of people's aesthetic concepts, flower and bird painting needs continuous innovation and breakthrough to meet the new market demand and aesthetic demand. On the other hand, with the accelerating globalization and increasingly frequent cultural exchanges, flower and bird painting also needs to constantly absorb and learn from the excellent elements of other cultures to enrich its artistic connotation and forms of expression.

The evolution of flower and bird painting in the 20th century vividly presents the exploration trajectory of artists blending traditional foundations with modern spirit. They not only uphold the respect and inheritance of traditional culture, but also demonstrate an open attitude towards new ideas and trends. This development trend enlightens us that flower and bird painting creation must return to nature, explore and express the pure artistic essence and vitality contained in it; At the same time, while adhering to the core spirit and traditional essence of traditional Chinese painting, we should actively explore innovative forms of expression and promote the expansion of artistic forms; It is even more important to respond sensitively to the pulse of the times, pay attention to the continuous evolution of aesthetic ideas, constantly enrich the connotation and expressive boundaries of works, and main-

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tain the vitality of this traditional art form.

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