

Exploring the Commonalities and Distinctiveness between Chinese Fine Brushwork Flower and Bird Paintings and European Oil Paintings

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Abstract

This study investigates the intersection and divergence between Chinese fine brushwork flower-and-bird paintings (gongbi hua) and European oil paintings, focusing on their representation of nature and symbolic communication. It examines shared thematic elements and aesthetic principles, such as the pursuit of harmony and beauty, while acknowledging distinct approaches shaped by differing cultural contexts. The research employs a comparative analysis methodology, scrutinizing composition, perspective, and material application in both traditions. Findings reveal that while both art forms explore similar subject matter, their execution and underlying philosophies diverge significantly. Chinese paintings emphasize meticulous detail and symbolic representation, whereas European oil paintings prioritize realism and the exploration of light and shadow. The analysis further explores how cultural values influence artistic choices, shaping the interpretation and appreciation of these art forms. The study contributes to a deeper understanding of cross-cultural artistic expression and provides insights into the diverse ways in which humans perceive and represent the natural world. It highlights the importance of considering both universal artistic concerns and culturally specific techniques in art historical analysis.

Keywords

China; Europe; Fine Brushwork Painting; Flower-and-Bird Painting; Oil Painting; Commonalities

1. Introduction

1.1. Background and Significance

Chinese fine brushwork and European oil painting represent distinct yet equally significant artistic traditions. Rooted in ancient philosophies and cultural values, Chinese brushwork, characterized by its emphasis on line, ink wash, and spiritual resonance, has held a central position in Chinese art for centuries (Sullivan, 1962). Its historical importance lies in its close association with calligraphy and its role in conveying philosophical and literary ideas through visual representation.

In contrast, European oil painting, which gained prominence during the Renaissance, is distinguished by its realism, attention to detail, and exploration of light and shadow (Gombrich, 2018). The development of oil paints allowed artists to achieve unprecedented levels of naturalism and create works that reflected the changing social, religious, and intellectual landscape of Europe. The cultural significance of European oil painting is evident in its patronage by wealthy elites and its role in shaping Western visual culture.

A comparative study of these two traditions offers valuable insights into the diverse ways in which humans have sought to represent the world around them and express their innermost thoughts and emotions (Barnett & Hoopes, 1995).

1.2. Research Question and Objectives

This study seeks to address a central research question: How do Chinese fine brushwork and European oil painting, despite their distinct origins and techniques, converge and diverge in their representation of nature, aesthetic principles, and cultural symbolism? To answer this, the research undertakes a comparative analysis across several key dimensions.

Firstly, it examines the shared subject matter, focusing on the representation of natural elements such as flowers, birds, and landscapes, and their associated symbolic meanings (Sullivan, 1989). Secondly, it investigates the aesthetic principles underpinning both traditions, particularly the concepts of harmony, balance, and the pursuit of beauty (Gombrich, 1995).

Finally, the study explores the distinct characteristics of each tradition, including artistic techniques, compositional strategies, and the influence of cultural context (Barnett & Ho, 1988). By systematically comparing these aspects, this research aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the artistic dialogue between Chinese and European painting traditions.

2. Shared Subject Matter and Symbolic Meaning

2.1. Representation of Nature: Flowers, Birds, and Landscapes

2.1.1. Flowers and Their Symbolism

Flowers, ubiquitous in both Chinese fine brushwork and European oil painting, serve as potent symbols imbued with cultural significance. The peony, often depicted in Chinese art, represents wealth, honor, and prosperity (Bath, 2015). Its lush petals and vibrant colors evoke opulence and are frequently associated with the imperial court. Similarly, the lotus flower, deeply rooted in Buddhist symbolism, signifies purity, enlightenment, and spiritual awakening (Cooper, 1992). Its ability to rise from muddy waters untainted embodies resilience and transcendence.

In European traditions, the rose reigns supreme as a symbol of love, beauty, and passion (de Givry, 1971). Different colors of roses convey nuanced meanings, with

red roses signifying romantic love, white roses representing purity and innocence, and yellow roses symbolizing friendship or, conversely, jealousy. Lilies, often associated with the Virgin Mary, embody purity, chastity, and resurrection (Ferguson, 1961). Their elegant form and fragrant aroma lend an air of grace and spirituality to religious and secular art alike. The careful selection and arrangement of these floral motifs contribute significantly to the overall narrative and emotional impact of the artwork.

Comparing the usage of flowers in both traditions reveals both shared and distinct symbolic landscapes. While the rose and peony both symbolize beauty and prosperity, their cultural contexts differ significantly. The rose is deeply entwined with Western romantic and religious traditions, while the peony holds a more prominent position in Chinese social and political spheres. Likewise, the lotus, with its strong ties to Eastern spiritual beliefs, finds less direct counterparts in European art, although water lilies, with their impressionistic portrayals, suggest a similar reverence for nature's tranquility (Rewald, 1973). Therefore, analyzing these floral representations provides valuable insights into the cultural values and aesthetic preferences of each tradition.

2.1.2. Birds and Their Symbolism

Turning to avian representations, both Chinese and European artistic traditions feature a diverse array of birds, each imbued with specific symbolic meanings that reflect cultural values and beliefs. The phoenix, for instance, holds a prominent position in both cultures, albeit with nuanced interpretations. In Chinese art, the Fenghuang (Chinese Phoenix) symbolizes immortality, rebirth, and imperial power, often associated with the Empress (Yang, 2010). Conversely, the Western phoenix, while also representing rebirth and renewal, is more closely linked to concepts of purification and resilience through fire (Cheung, 2009).

Cranes, particularly revered in East Asian art, are potent symbols of longevity, wisdom, and a connection to the divine. Their graceful movements and association with mythical realms contribute to their elevated status (Fong, 2015). In contrast, European art features cranes less frequently, although they occasionally appear as emblems of vigilance or good fortune. Doves, universally recognized as symbols of peace, love, and purity, are prevalent in both traditions. In Christian European art, the dove represents the Holy Spirit, often depicted in scenes of annunciation or baptism (Ferguson, 1961). Similarly, in Chinese art, doves can symbolize marital harmony and fidelity. Robins, more common in European art, often carry associations with spring, hope, and even sacrifice, particularly in Victorian symbolism (Armstrong, 1958).

Other birds, such as eagles, owls, and peacocks, also carry significant symbolic weight within their respective cultural contexts. Eagles, representing power and authority, are frequently found in European heraldry and imperial imagery, while

owls, often associated with wisdom and knowledge, can also symbolize darkness or death. Peacocks, with their resplendent plumage, are symbols of beauty, pride, and immortality in both Eastern and Western art, though their specific connotations may vary depending on the cultural context (Li & Smith, 2005). These diverse avian representations underscore the rich tapestry of symbolic meanings embedded within both Chinese and European artistic traditions.

2.2. Aesthetic Principles: Harmony, Balance, and Beauty

2.2.1. Harmony and Balance in Composition

In both Chinese and European painting traditions, the arrangement of visual elements plays a crucial role in establishing harmony and balance within a composition. Harmony, in this context, refers to the cohesive integration of diverse elements to create a unified and aesthetically pleasing whole, while balance addresses the distribution of visual weight to achieve equilibrium (Arnheim, 1974). These principles are achieved through various strategies, including symmetry, asymmetry, and the application of mathematical ratios such as the golden ratio.

Symmetry, characterized by a mirrored arrangement of elements around a central axis, is frequently employed in both cultures to convey a sense of stability, formality, and order. Examples can be found in European Renaissance portraiture, where the subject is often positioned centrally to create a balanced and harmonious image (Wittkower, 1998). Conversely, asymmetry, which involves an unequal distribution of visual weight, introduces dynamism and visual interest. Chinese landscape paintings often utilize asymmetry to depict the natural world's inherent irregularity and spontaneity, creating a sense of movement and depth (Sullivan, 1974). The strategic placement of elements, such as a prominent tree or a distant mountain, counterbalances the composition without replicating the other side, achieving a more organic balance.

The golden ratio, approximately 1.618, has been recognized since antiquity as a proportion that embodies aesthetic harmony. Its application in both Chinese and European art, though sometimes debated, is believed to contribute to the visual appeal of compositions (Livio, 2002). While explicit evidence of its conscious use may be limited, the underlying principles of proportion and balance that the golden ratio represents are evident in the careful arrangement of elements in both traditions. Ultimately, the pursuit of harmony and balance in composition reflects a deeper cultural understanding of the interconnectedness of elements and the desire to create visually satisfying and meaningful artworks.

2.2.2. The Pursuit of Beauty and Emotional Expression

Beyond compositional harmony and balance, both Chinese and European painting traditions fundamentally aim to capture beauty and evoke emotional responses in the viewer. This pursuit is evident in their respective approaches to representing

nature, where elements like color, light, and brushwork are strategically employed to achieve desired aesthetic and emotional effects (Sullivan, 1989). Chinese landscape painting, for instance, often utilizes subtle gradations of ink and color to create a sense of tranquility and awe, inviting the viewer to contemplate the vastness and serenity of the natural world (Munro, 2016).

Similarly, European landscape painters, particularly during the Romantic era, sought to convey powerful emotions through their depictions of nature. Artists like Turner employed dramatic light and color to evoke feelings of sublime terror and awe in the face of nature's power (Hamilton, 2009). The use of color is critical; warm hues might suggest joy and vitality, while cooler tones could evoke melancholy or introspection. Brushwork, too, plays a significant role. Fluid, expressive brushstrokes can convey a sense of movement and energy, while more controlled and precise strokes might suggest stillness and contemplation (Arnheim, 2004). In both traditions, the artist's skill lies in manipulating these elements to create a visual experience that resonates emotionally with the viewer, reflecting a deep appreciation for the beauty inherent in the natural world and the human capacity for emotional response.

Ultimately, the shared emphasis on beauty and emotional expression underscores a fundamental connection between Chinese and European artistic sensibilities, despite their distinct cultural contexts and stylistic conventions. Both traditions recognize the power of art to not only represent the world but also to shape our emotional understanding of it.

3. Distinct Characteristics: Technique, Composition, and Cultural Context

3.1. Artistic Techniques and Material Usage

3.1.1. Brushwork and Line Quality

Brushwork stands as a defining characteristic differentiating Chinese fine brushwork painting from European oil painting traditions. In Chinese painting, meticulous line control, known as 'gongbi,' is paramount. The artist employs a variety of brushstrokes, each imbued with specific intent, to delineate form and texture (Sullivan, 1999). The 'zhongfeng' (middle brush) technique, for instance, emphasizes a controlled, even line, while the 'cefeng' (side brush) technique creates textured, broken lines, adding dynamism to the composition (Barnhart, 1997). These nuances in brush handling directly contribute to the overall aesthetic and expressive qualities of the artwork. The quality of the line itself is considered a direct reflection of the artist's character and skill, demanding years of disciplined practice (Hay, 2010).

Conversely, European oil painting, while also valuing skillful brushwork, often prioritizes the manipulation of paint to create tonal variations and illusions of depth

and volume. Techniques such as impasto, where thick layers of paint are applied to the canvas, create a tactile surface and capture the play of light and shadow (Gombrich, 2016). Unlike the precise, deliberate lines of Chinese brushwork, European oil painting frequently employs looser, more expressive brushstrokes to convey movement and emotion (Arnheim, 2004). The emphasis shifts from the inherent quality of the line to the overall effect achieved through the manipulation of the medium. Artists like Rembrandt, for example, used a heavily loaded brush and varied pressure to create a sense of depth and texture, moving away from the emphasis on line seen in Chinese painting (Alpers, 1988).

In summary, while both traditions value skillful execution, Chinese fine brushwork painting emphasizes precise line control and varied brushstrokes to define form and texture, whereas European oil painting often prioritizes the manipulation of paint to create tonal variations, depth, and expressive effects.

3.1.2. Pigments, Mediums, and Supports

Beyond brushwork, the divergent material choices in East Asian and European painting traditions significantly shaped their aesthetic characteristics. In East Asian art, particularly traditional Chinese and Japanese painting, pigments were often derived from natural sources such as minerals and plants (Barnard, 2005). These pigments were meticulously ground and mixed with binding agents, most commonly animal glue, to create water-based paints suitable for application on silk or paper (Hayashi, 2010). The absorbency of these supports necessitated careful control of ink and color application, contributing to the characteristic subtlety and nuanced tonal variations seen in East Asian paintings. Furthermore, the use of silk and paper, while lending a delicate quality to the artwork, also posed challenges in terms of preservation and longevity, requiring specialized conservation techniques (Clunas, 1997).

In contrast, European painting, particularly from the Renaissance onwards, heavily relied on oil-based mediums. Oil paints, typically composed of pigments suspended in linseed oil, offered artists greater flexibility in terms of blending, layering, and achieving rich, saturated colors (Bomford et al., 1989). The use of canvas as a primary support provided a durable and stable surface for oil painting, allowing for larger-scale works and greater resistance to environmental factors. The properties of oil paint also facilitated the development of techniques such as impasto and glazing, which contributed to the textural and luminous qualities characteristic of European painting. The chemical stability of oil paints, while generally superior to water-based media, still necessitates careful attention to environmental control and conservation practices to ensure the long-term preservation of artworks (Phenix, 2013).

Ultimately, the selection of pigments, mediums, and supports was integral to the distinct visual languages of East Asian and European painting. East Asian art favored

water-based media on absorbent supports, emphasizing line and subtle color gradations, while European art utilized oil-based media on canvas, enabling rich color, texture, and durability.

3.2. Composition, Perspective, and Cultural Influences

3.2.1. Compositional Strategies

Compositional strategies represent a significant divergence between Chinese fine brushwork and European oil painting, reflecting differing cultural values and aesthetic philosophies. Chinese painting often emphasizes the concept of “empty space”, which is not merely absence but an active element that contributes to the overall harmony and balance of the composition (Sullivan, 1962). This deliberate use of negative space invites contemplation and allows the viewer’s imagination to complete the scene, fostering a sense of serenity and connection with nature (Munro, 1989). Key elements, such as a solitary bird or a blossoming branch, are strategically placed to guide the eye and create a dynamic yet balanced visual experience. Framing devices, when used, are subtle and often integrated into the natural landscape, such as a mist-shrouded mountain range or a winding river.

In contrast, European oil painting, particularly from the Renaissance onwards, tends to favor a more structured and densely populated composition. The concept of **horror vacui**, or fear of empty space, often drives the arrangement of elements within the frame (Friedländer, 1965). Artists frequently employ strong framing devices, such as architectural elements, curtains, or figures placed in the foreground, to define the pictorial space and direct the viewer’s attention to the central subject (Alpers, 1983). The placement of key elements is often dictated by principles of linear perspective and geometric composition, creating a sense of depth, realism, and narrative focus. While balance remains important, it is often achieved through symmetry or the careful distribution of visual weight, rather than through the incorporation of empty space.

These contrasting compositional approaches reflect fundamental differences in cultural perspectives. Chinese painting seeks to evoke a sense of harmony and interconnectedness with the natural world, while European painting often aims to capture a specific moment in time or to convey a particular narrative or emotion with clarity and precision. The use of empty space in Chinese art invites introspection and personal interpretation, whereas the densely populated compositions of European art often provide a more defined and structured viewing experience.

3.2.2. Perspective and Spatial Representation

A crucial distinction between Chinese fine brushwork and European oil painting lies in their approaches to perspective and spatial representation. Chinese painting traditionally employs atmospheric perspective, also known as aerial perspective, to

create a sense of depth and distance (Sullivan, 1999). This technique relies on modulating color and clarity to suggest recession, with distant objects appearing paler and less defined. The emphasis is not on replicating a fixed viewpoint, but rather on conveying a holistic and immersive experience of the landscape. This approach aligns with Daoist and Buddhist philosophies, which prioritize subjective experience and the interconnectedness of all things (Munro, 1989).

In contrast, European oil painting, particularly from the Renaissance onwards, has predominantly utilized linear perspective. Developed mathematically, linear perspective creates the illusion of three-dimensional space on a two-dimensional surface by converging parallel lines at a vanishing point (Panofsky, 1991). This system offers a precise and rational representation of space, reflecting a worldview that emphasizes objectivity and empirical observation. The adoption of linear perspective in European art coincided with the rise of scientific inquiry and a growing interest in anatomical accuracy and realistic depiction (Kemp, 1990). The choice of perspective is not merely a technical one; it reflects fundamental cultural values and epistemological assumptions. While atmospheric perspective invites the viewer to wander through the landscape, linear perspective positions the viewer as a detached observer, reinforcing different modes of engagement with the world.

Furthermore, the cultural implications extend to the very understanding of space itself. Chinese painting often incorporates multiple perspectives within a single composition, allowing the viewer to experience the scene from various vantage points simultaneously (Barnhart, 1997). This approach challenges the notion of a fixed, objective reality and emphasizes the dynamic and ever-changing nature of perception. Conversely, the singular vanishing point of linear perspective reinforces the idea of a stable and measurable world, governed by universal laws. The divergence in perspective techniques underscores the profound differences in how these two artistic traditions conceptualize and represent spatial reality.

4. Conclusion

4.1. Summary of Findings

In summary, this study reveals both commonalities and divergences in the artistic representation of nature across cultures. A shared human interest in depicting natural elements such as flowers, birds, and landscapes is evident, reflecting a universal appreciation for the aesthetic qualities and symbolic meanings inherent in the natural world (Ito, 2010). These shared subjects often convey similar symbolic weight, representing themes of beauty, transience, and spiritual connection across diverse cultural contexts (Eliade, 1959).

However, the modes of artistic expression vary significantly, reflecting culturally specific techniques, compositional strategies, and philosophical underpinnings. Differences in brushwork, pigment usage, and perspective construction highlight the distinct artistic traditions and cultural values that shape artistic creation (Sullivan,

1961). While a universal pursuit of beauty and harmony is apparent, the manifestation of these principles is filtered through the lens of cultural context, resulting in a rich tapestry of artistic diversity. The study underscores the interplay between universal human experiences and culturally specific interpretations in the realm of art.

4.2. Implications and Future Research

The preceding analysis of cross-cultural artistic representations of nature carries significant implications for understanding human cognition and cultural exchange. The shared motifs of flowers, birds, and landscapes, coupled with divergent artistic techniques, underscore the universality of aesthetic appreciation while simultaneously highlighting the impact of cultural context on artistic expression (Dissanayake, 1992). These findings contribute to a broader understanding of how humans perceive, interpret, and represent the natural world, suggesting a fundamental human drive to find meaning and beauty in the environment.

Future research could explore the influence of specific artists or movements on the cross-cultural exchange of artistic ideas. Examining the role of trade routes, migration patterns, and technological advancements in disseminating artistic styles and techniques would provide a more nuanced understanding of the dynamics of cross-cultural artistic exchange (Kempers, 1992). Furthermore, investigating the impact of globalization on contemporary artistic representations of nature could reveal how modern technologies and interconnectedness are shaping artistic expression across cultures (Iwabuchi, 2002). Such investigations could also benefit from incorporating perspectives from environmental psychology and cognitive science to further elucidate the interplay between human perception, cultural context, and artistic creation.

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