

Wu Guanzhong's Colored Ink Landscapes: An exploration of the healing and environmental protection function of the double swallows

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Abstract

In contemporary society, as people pay increasing attention to environmental protection, the environmental protection function of art has also garnered more focus. This paper will explore the healing and environmental protection functions of art. By analyzing the aesthetic elements and cultural significance of Wu Guanzhong's "Double Swallows," we aim to elucidate how Wu Guanzhong's colored ink landscape paintings fulfill their artistic healing role and enhance environmental awareness.

Keywords: Wu Guanzhong, color ink painting, art healing, environmental protection

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1.0 Introduction

The formation and origin of Chinese landscape painting can be traced back to people's deep love for the natural environment on which they depend. It reflects the relationship between man and nature, blending the two perfectly into a harmonious whole. Wu Guanzhong once said, "I have been painting Jiangnan off and on all my life." Among the many works on the subject of Jiangnan, and even among all my works, I think "Double Swallows" is the most prominent and representative. Double Swallows Fly Up, Nostalgia Unbroken. His works reflect his unique artistic method and deep concern for his hometown and environment. This paper aims to discuss the healing function of Wu Guanzhong's colored ink landscape paintings and the environmental protection function through the iconographic analysis of his work "Double Swallows".

2.0 Literature Review

Art healing originated in the West and is a new discipline that emerged in Europe and the United States after World War II to achieve the ultimate healing purpose through the interdisciplinary psychology of art, psychology, and medicine. The healing effect of art is divided

into two aspects from the audience's point of view: 1) the viewer's healing during the appreciation of artworks and 2) the creator's healing of himself during the creation process.

Art healing, particularly in the form of painting healing, is an important branch of expressive arts healing that promotes individual mental health and emotional expression through painting. From a psychological perspective, Freud and Jung believed that artistic creation can reveal the contents of the unconscious mind. Jung especially emphasized the value of exploring symbols and archetypes in the collective unconscious through artwork, viewing it as a way to connect individuals with their deeper inner selves. From a humanistic viewpoint, psychologists such as Carl Rogers considered creative expression as a means of self-actualization. In cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), painting healing aids individuals in recognizing and adjusting negative thought patterns that lead to emotional distress and maladaptive behaviors through the reflective and interpretive processes involved in art creation.

The healing effect of art is conveyed through different mediums in the creation of the creator, and in the process of appreciating the work, the viewer can play a healing role by empathizing with the work. People can resolve their inner conflicts, reduce stress, promote self-awareness, and treat mental illnesses through art creation and appreciation.

3.0 Methodology

This paper analyzes the theory of Iconography concerning Panofsky. Panofsky divides the analysis of artistic meaning into three stages: pre-iconographic description, iconographic analysis, and iconographic interpretation.

In Studies in Iconography, Panofsky details his ideas about the three levels of art historical understanding: Primary or natural themes: the most basic level of understanding, which consists of perceiving the work in its pure form. Secondary or traditional themes: this stratum goes further and brings cultural and iconographic knowledge. Tertiary or intrinsic meaning or content considers personal, technical, and cultural history when understanding the work. It does not view art as an isolated event but as a product of a historical context. In essence, the last level is a synthesis. The art historian asks, "What does it all mean?"

This paper focuses on the second level. Through an in-depth analysis of the colors, lines, and symbolism of the paintings, it illuminates the healing function of art in his work and stimulates the viewer's awareness of environmental protection.

Because Erwin Panofsky emphasized the content, inner meaning, symbols, and themes of the visual arts in international journals (Panofsky, 1955), this paper uses a qualitative approach based on the concept of interpretive research. Interpretive research emphasizes the process of textual interpretation, focusing on how participants' narratives are understood. It seeks to explore the underlying meanings and how participants construct their social reality through language.

4.0 Findings

4.1 The First Level: Pre-Iconographical Description

This artwork is titled "Double Swallows" and was created in 1988 by Wu Guanzhong. Using ink as the foundation on paper, the artist added green, yellow, red, and other to depict the scene. Throughout the composition, there are houses with black tiles and white walls typical of the Jiangnan region, composed of simple lines and gray-black blocks. The left side of the picture is left blank, with a well-arranged mix of black and white blocks. In the center of the painting stands a tall tree with gracefully extending branches, and a tall, long white wall occupies about two-fifths of the composition. Below the wall is a serene lake with a misty reflection. In the sky above, two agile swallows are depicted in flight.



Figure 1. "Double Swallows" 69cm×137cm 1988

4.2 The Second Level: Iconographical Analysis

The image depicts typical Jiangnan-style buildings, calm waters, and Jiangnan architecture. A plain wall lying in one-third of the plane of "Double Swallows" is the main body of the painting, and the white space of the main body reflects another kind of quietness and seclusion.

The composition of "Double Swallows" appears deceptively simple, bearing a striking resemblance to the numerous "Water Village"

(水乡) artworks he created in the 1980s. Spanning the entire canvas are the black-tiled, white-walled houses typical of the Jiangnan region, composed of clean lines and black-gray blocks. The composition leaves ample white space, with a calm lake surface under the wall, creating a serene reflection that complements the dignified and clean nature of the white walls. This painting focuses on plane segmentation and geometric combinations. The narrow, elongated black doorways on the horizontal white wall present a distinct contrast, emphasizing the white wall's solemn, pristine, and elegant qualities.

E. Spranger categorized human life into six types: theoretical, economic, social, political, artistic, and religious. Wu Guanzhong, on the other hand, mainly belongs to the artistic type. According to Freud's theory, "Sublimation is the psychological process of transforming the primitive impulses of the ego into complex actions through the ego." In the challenging times when he could not realize his ideal, Wu Guanzhong turned his attention to the natural landscape. He sublimated his artistic style and philosophy by depicting landscapes and sublimating them into an inner experience. Through artistic creation, he realized the inheritance of his artistic philosophy and spiritual heritage. Wu Guanzhong integrates landscape elements into his artistic creations, expressing his deep yearning for the unique beauty of the Jiangnan water towns.

Several narrow and slender black doors are skillfully arranged to add rhythm to the composition. The square gives a very open, heavy, and stable feeling. In this serene image, one finds a pair of swallows in agile flight, disturbing the peaceful and ancient atmosphere. This introduces a hint of freshness and vibrant energy that sweeps away the lively atmosphere. The painting "Two Swallows" depicts the scenery of the Jiangnan water town with simple but uniquely rhythmic lines. By highly summarizing the picture's composition, the artist presents Jiangnan's unique, ancient, and fresh flavor. The calm river water, the old white wall, and an ancient tree form a simple and powerful visual focus, conveying a sense of peace and tranquility to the viewer.

The tree is depicted using traditional Chinese painting techniques, with lines depicting delicate branches reminiscent of the elegant gestures of women in southern China. This energizes the composition. In art therapy, trees often bridge nature and personal emotions.

Humans have recognized a special connection with trees since ancient times. Every major religion included trees in their earliest stories. The Egyptians had their sacred groves, and the Bible mentions trees at least 120 times. The Celts saw the magical power of different kinds of trees. Philosophers such as Rousseau and Thoreau claimed that engaging with trees and the outdoors could bring moral values or goodness. J. Sterling Morton, the founder of Tree Day, agreed, saying, "Children reared among trees and flowers growing up with them will be better in mind and heart than children reared among hogs and cattle."

Denise Mitten succinctly listed the psychological-emotional values of spending time in nature (of which trees are a significant component): Mental restoration, Stress reduction and its impacts, Attention restoration, Improved mood states, Reduction of depression, Reduction of anger and anxiety, Enhanced feelings of pleasure, Increased mental acuity, Reduced mental fatigue, Improved problem solving-ability, Improved concentration, Improved body image for women, Increased feelings of empowerment, Encouragement of nurturing characteristics, Decreased risk of seasonal affective disorder (SAD), Mitigation of the impact of dementia.

Thus, viewers may experience emotional healing and a sense of oneness with nature by appreciating the trees in the paintings, which may increase their desire to protect the environment.



Figure 2. "Double Swallows"(local)

In this painting, the distinction between water and sky seems challenging. The only differentiation is the reflection in the water and the winged twin swallows soaring in the sky, which infuse vitality into the composition.



Figure 3. "Double Swallows"(local)

Swallows, as a symbol in traditional Chinese culture, carry profound meanings. In ancient China, swallows were considered symbols of auspiciousness, bringing good luck and positive news. In the poetry of the Tang Dynasty poet Cen Shen, a verse reads: "In September, the cold swallows arrive, and my heart is suddenly startled. (九月寒燕到，余心忽若惊)" This expresses the emotional impact and profound cultural connotations brought by swallows. Similarly, in this artwork, the paired swallows soaring in the upper left corner bring dynamism and brightness to the entire composition, disrupting its tranquility. The combination of movement and stillness highlights the tension in the artwork, imbued with poetic and artistic elements, radiating typical Chinese cultural significance.

The reflection is portrayed with curved gray lines, creating a hazy effect contrasting the calm water surface and clear water quality. This immersive technique allows the viewer to experience the tranquil ambiance of the Jiangnan water village. The soft qualities of the lines also convey a sense of serenity and comfort to the viewer and will emit a soothing feeling that will help to relieve the viewer's tension and anxiety. The concept of lines in art psychology is an age-old question. Poffenberger and Barrows organized an experimental study with a participation of 500 people, asking subjects to select lines from 18 types (Figure 5) that conveyed emotions such as "sadness," "serenity," "joy," and "anger." While there were differences in the subjects' responses to details, the majority tended to associate curves with a sense of "serenity" or "sadness."



Figure 4. "Double Swallows"(local)

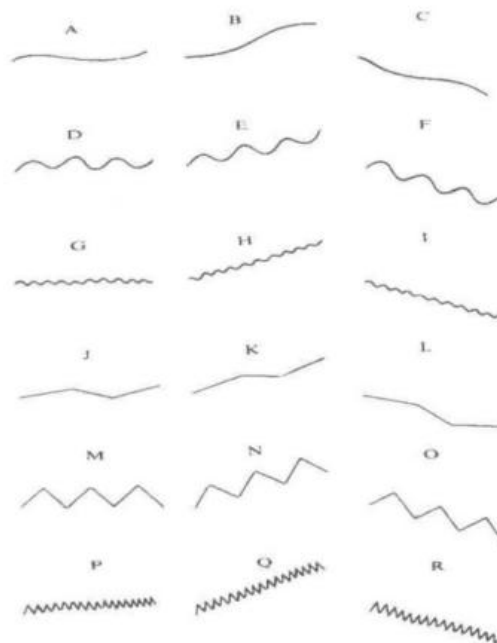


Figure 5

In front of the door, two or three dots of either red or blue, perhaps clothes drying, embellish the scene along with the yellow-green and Song-colored trees, adding a touch of playfulness to the picture. These lively colors also highlight the pristine white of the walls while simultaneously depicting the trees' exuberant and unrestrained growth. The color palette in the image is predominantly black, white, and gray, creating the typical tones of Jiangnan. According to psychological studies, people's attitudes toward colors involve four aspects: objective, physiological, associative, and personality. Colors can evoke pleasant emotional responses due to their purity, intensity, and richness. Conversely, unpleasant emotional responses arise from mixed, diluted, dull, or vague colors. The sporadic touches of vibrant red and blue in the image enhance its liveliness, although the overall atmosphere of Jiangnan residences is tranquil, with a hint of liveliness.

4.3 The Third Level: Iconological Interpretation

The West Lake often sketched Wu Guanzhong during his studies at the Hangzhou Academy of Fine Arts, and when he studied in Paris, he painted landscapes everywhere. In the 1950s, he painted Beijing's streets, alleys, temples, and pagodas in a rigorously realistic manner. Gradually, the scope of his sketching also extended to Wutai Mountain, Shaoxing, Jinggang Mountain, Ruijin, Hongtong, Hainan Island, and other places. Until the end of the 1950s, he ultimately gave up his original intention of "shocking the society with art," no longer depicted real people, and devoted himself to landscape painting, which could not serve politics. From then on, landscape painting became his life-long obsession.

In the 1960s, Wu Guanzhong kept running to Shaoxing. During middle school, he loved literature and especially admired Lu Xun, whose works influenced his life. The characters in Lu Xun's paintings were all familiar to Wu Guanzhong from his hometown, but since Wu Guanzhong's artistic outlook and stylistic pursuits could no longer be reflected in the characters, he was reminded of Lu Xun's The Hometown, which firmly established Wu Guanzhong's step from the bridge in his hometown in the South of the Yangtze River into the unknown stylistic world of his own.

Wu Guanzhong enthusiastically introduced several Western painters, with Maurice Utrillo standing out as a particularly great inspiration. Maurice Utrillo, an influential French landscape painter of the 19th century, left an indelible mark on Wu Guanzhong's artistic journey, primarily through his works portraying urban streetscapes during the "White Period."

The main body of Utrillo's work is richly layered in gray tones, with heavy blacks, elegant browns, and rich vermilion dotted throughout; the overall gray atmosphere creates a fantastic contrast. The tone of the artist's work is influenced by what happened to him in his life. He grew up as an illegitimate child, paralyzed by alcohol, and then, under the influence of his mother, the painter Suzanne Valladon, he began a new life by putting his feelings into painting.

However, unlike the pain and sadness he sometimes feels in real life, he expresses his love for the Montmartre region, with its bohemian solid atmosphere, in a poetic way in his creations. The rough brushstrokes give the noisy city a serene soul. Wu Guanzhong found a similar sentiment in the works of this landscape painter when he was studying in France. The strong contrast between black and white reminded him of the white-walled and black-tiled Jiangnan, the water towns haunted by nostalgia. In Wu Guanzhong's correspondence with Wu Dayu, he once wrote: "Since I stayed in Europe for a year and a half, I have tested myself and illuminated my own..... Today, my love and reverence for modern art have been shaken. I do not want to spend my life choosing a flower's career.....a year and a half; I know that this society, this crowd, and I do not relate to those who live and shine in the face of the I am very isolated. The wild dance of the lights is too rusty for me. My heart is living in a vacuum.....I do not want to work alone and the people who live together indifferently.....The study of art is not in Europe, not in Paris, not in the master's studio, in the motherland, in the hometown, in the homeland, in their hearts. "

Wu Guanzhong once said: I have been painting Jiangnan all my life. Among the many works based on Jiangnan, or even among all my works, the most prominent and representative is Double Swallows. Although the two swallows have flown away, nostalgia still exists.

5.0 Discussion

This study demonstrates that by analyzing Wu Guanzhong's painting "Double Swallows" through the principles of Panofsky's iconology, it reflects a profound art therapy function, and on this basis, can resonate with the viewer and trigger the viewer's desire to protect the environment.

Wu Guanzhong's ink and color paintings primarily focus on the landscapes and architecture of Jiangnan. The dynamic composition and vibrant colors in his paintings allow viewers to appreciate the beauty of nature. In this particular work, the addition of the symbol of swallows, representing the harmony between heaven and humanity, not only enhances the sense of tranquility and harmony in the painting but also underscores the necessity of ecological conservation and strengthens the emotional impact of the artwork.

6.0 Conclusion& Recommendations

"Double Swallows" demonstrates a powerful artistic healing function for the viewer through the analysis of composition, colors, lines, and elements. The composition is simple yet rich in connotation, and the interweaving of colors and lines creates an atmosphere of harmony and serenity. For Wu Guanzhong, the healing function of "Double Swallows" is mainly reflected in his attachment to the water towns south of the Yangtze River and the solace they provide against external pressures. For the viewer, the work evokes emotional resonance, brings relaxation, calmness, and contemplation, and creates a desire to protect nature.

This paper has limitations in terms of literature and information. Although the author has collected as much relevant literature and information as possible, some sources may have been overlooked or missed, which could affect the comprehensiveness of the research. Additionally, since this study is an interpretive qualitative research, the results carry a degree of subjectivity.

Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

In the traditional academic discourse, the discussion of Wu Guanzhong's color ink landscape paintings mainly focuses on the decorative nature of his picture language, the development, and contemporaneity of color ink paintings, painting styles, techniques, etc. However, more research is needed from the perspectives of psychology and environmental protection, and this article provides a new perspective for the study of Wu Guanzhong's color ink landscape paintings.

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