

The Logic Behind the Use of Brushwork and Color in Ren Bonian's Flower-and-Bird Paintings: Transformation and Application in Modern Chinese Painting Creation

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Abstract: Contemporary flower-and-bird painting creation faces a dilemma between meticulousness and freedom—either excessively pursuing detailed craftsmanship at the expense of expressive spirit, or employing brushwork indiscriminately without structural coherence. This study examines the brushwork and color application logic in Ren Bonian's works, proposing a three-dimensional framework of “using brush to depict form,” “using ink to convey vitality,” and “using color to highlight essence,” thereby revealing his intrinsic mechanism of “controlling dynamism through compositional principles.” It identifies common misinterpretations of Ren Bonian's approach in modern practice and proposes three transformation pathways: shifting from “sketching from life” to “expressing inner vision”; upgrading color structure from “accentuating details” to “constructive composition”; and elevating artistic language from “instantaneous moments” to “imagery-based abstraction,” supported by analyses of contemporary works. The paper argues that learning from Ren Bonian should extend beyond stylistic imitation to embrace his methodology of “transforming life experiences into brushwork parameters,” achieving a creative transition from “imitating techniques” to “emulating artistic intent,” thus providing actionable methodological guidance for revitalizing traditional elements in contemporary Chinese painting.

Keywords: Ren Bonian; Boneless flower-and-bird painting; Brushwork logic; Contemporary interpretation

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1. Origin of the problem and research focus

1.1. The dilemma between “Mastery of Technique” and “Delegation of Control”: The ink-and-pencil challenge in contemporary flower-and-bird painting

Contemporary Chinese flower-and-bird painting creation exhibits two distinct tendencies. The first is an excessive pursuit of meticulous detail, resulting in stiff compositions devoid of the spirit of freehand expression. While viewers may admire the technical prowess, they fail to perceive the breath and movement inherent in flowers and birds as “living entities.” Yet the essence of flower-and-bird painting lies in capturing

states of life rather than replicating physical forms. The second tendency involves a blind pursuit of “grand freehand style,” reducing freehand expression to arbitrary brushwork, emphasizing eccentricity and brutality as manifestations of individuality. This approach leads to a loss of rhythmicity in lines and depth in ink gradations; while appearing bold, it lacks internal structural coherence and logical framework, failing to achieve the true essence of “similarity in unlikeness” and degenerating into hollow venting. The root issue stems from creators’ failure to understand that “freedom” presupposes “control” —free expression must be grounded in profound artistic discipline. Techniques may be refined yet fail to resonate emotionally, and intense feelings often lack cohesion. How to maintain vitality within the order of brush and ink, and preserve discipline amidst free expression, remains the central challenge urgently awaiting resolution in contemporary flower-and-bird painting.

1.2. Ren Bonian as a “Solution”: A model of brushwork that balances vividness and discipline

In the evolutionary framework of late Qing dynasty flower-and-bird painting, Ren Bonian (1840–1896) occupies a distinctive position. He pioneered a unique approach bridging meticulous craftsmanship and expressive freedom: conveying dynamism through swift yet refined brushwork, creating spatial depth with rich yet orderly ink gradations, and illuminating life’s essence with vibrant yet tasteful colors—earning him the reputation of being “appreciated by both connoisseurs and general audiences.” Connoisseurs recognize his profound traditional mastery, while casual viewers perceive an immediate sense of vitality. The key lies in how brushwork and color application form a coherent logical system, centered around the principle of “controlling momentum through technique” —using rigorous brushwork principles to govern life’s dynamic flow. Rapid strokes define directional movement, slow strokes pinpoint focal points; dense ink emphasizes weight distribution, light ink creates layered effects, and alternating dry and wet techniques establish rhythmic breathing patterns; colors are applied to critical areas, each stroke serving either narrative emphasis or textual characterization. This ability to transform vivid expression into precise technical parameters enables his works to maintain artistic freedom while adhering to established compositional principles.

1.3. Research perspective: From “Style Imitation” to “Logical Transformation”

To elucidate how brushwork, ink application, and color composition synergistically create a “vibrant” internal structure while avoiding common misconceptions, this paper proposes three transformative pathways—from “sketching from life” to “expressing inner vision,” from “inspiration sparks” to “artistic construction,” and from “instantaneous moments” to “imagery formation” —supported by practical case studies. The article argues that the greatest value of Ren Bonian’s flower-and-bird paintings lies not in providing a “stylistic model” but in offering a comprehensive “creative mechanism.” Learning from Ren Bonian should extend beyond imitating surface forms or chromatic expressions; it requires mastering the mindset of “transforming life states into brush-ink parameters”: conveying force through brush speed, suggesting spatial depth through ink tones, and controlling rhythm through color usage. Only by achieving this shift from “imitating techniques” to “emulating artistic intent” can Ren Bonian’s traditional resources be revitalized in contemporary Chinese painting practice. This constitutes both the focus of this study and the concrete implementation of “creative transformation” in Ren Bonian research.

2. The internal structure of the logic behind brushwork and color application

2.1. "Using the brush to depict forms": Combining the strengths of meticulous detail and freehand expression

The brushwork in Ren Bonian's flower-and-bird paintings fundamentally lies in the concept of "writing." In his early years, he "imitated the techniques of Northern Song artists, using solely scorched ink to outline structures" ^[1], establishing a solid foundation in meticulous line drawing. The flowers and birds in his works are not merely "sketched" but rendered with the same fluidity as calligraphy. The most distinctive feature of his brushwork is its blend of precision and expressiveness—exquisite detail in precise sections and freehand spontaneity in expressive areas, seamlessly transitioning between the two within a single composition. Taking the painting "Willows and Swallows in the Wind" housed in the Palace Museum as an example, it perfectly exemplifies Ren Bonian's mastery of combining meticulous detail with expressive freedom. The willow branches are rendered using the "flying-white technique" ^[2], executed swiftly with broad strokes whose pressure and turns convey powerful dynamism; the leaves employ a style akin to bamboo painting, drawn with sweeping, flowing lines that naturally capture their swaying motion through rhythmic brush movements. Six small swallows soar against the wind, their bodies and heads often depicted with side strokes, achieving concise forms and rich ink integration; their wings and feathers are painted with swift, fluid brushstrokes reminiscent of cursive script, with key feathers rendered using central or side strokes that exhibit both vigor and a subtle "flying-white" effect. Yet beneath this simplicity lies precision: the swallow's head is outlined decisively, eyes highlighted with earthy yellow dots for vivid expression, beak defined by short, firm strokes, and gaze controlled by localized dotting. This approach of "extreme precision in details and extreme expressiveness in broad strokes" grants the painting both the unrestrained spirit of freehand artistry and the meticulous accuracy of detailed rendering ^[3]. The brilliance of Ren Bonian's brushwork lies precisely here: he does not make an either-or choice between meticulous detail and freehand expression. Still, he allows both elements to complement each other within a single work—the spontaneity of the freehand style finds its foundation in the precision of the detailed rendering. In contrast, the accuracy of the detailed work avoids stiffness thanks to the dynamic energy of the freehand approach.

2.2. "Infusing Vitality through Ink": The rhythmic formation of ink's dry-wet textures

While brushwork addresses "how to depict form," ink application deals with "how to bring space to life." Ren Bonian's ink techniques in flower-and-bird paintings form a rhythmic system akin to breathing—the alternation of dryness, wetness, intensity, and subtlety is not mere arbitrary manipulation of ink but a deliberate organization reflecting air movement, spatial depth, and vital energy.

In "Wind, Willows, and Swallows", the willow branches are rendered using the flying-white technique, where the intermittent contact between the brush tip and paper fibers creates a slightly textured edge that evokes the sensation of wind blowing over the branches—this exemplifies the function of dry brushwork in producing a sense of friction. Conversely, wet brushstrokes and ink diffusion serve to establish spatial atmosphere. In "Wisteria and Birds", the vines are executed with wet brushes, resulting in natural ink gradations and a fluid quality. The bird feathers are depicted by applying light ink in layers with fine strokes, achieving a fluffy texture; the branches, after being outlined with light ink, are partially washed and absorbed with water, creating both defined edges and a mottled appearance ^[4]. This interplay between dry and wet techniques establishes a rhythmic progression from localized density to overall looseness: key areas receive drier, rougher, and harder treatment, while surrounding regions exhibit greater moisture, smoothness, and

openness, giving the composition a sense of dynamic movement and spatial flow.

Tissues with varying ink densities serve to control spatial depth and visual focus. When depicting swallows, Ren Bonian “used dense ink for the swallow’s body and wings, and light ink for its abdomen” —dense ink emphasizes structural balance, while light ink creates tonal gradations, achieving volume and dynamism through subtle variations in ink density. In “Embroidered Ball and Banana Tree”, he combined the techniques of the boneless method and freehand brushwork; through simple yet expressive strokes and ink combinations, he maintained precise modeling while capturing the vivid essence of natural subjects. Brush and ink never separated in Ren Bonian’s work: the speed of brushstrokes determined the “direction of movement and sense of force,” whereas ink density and wetness conveyed the “spatial context and vitality of motion.” Together, they facilitate the transition from “form” to “vitality.”

2.3. “Adding the Finishing Touch with Color”: The structural function of color application and narrative focus

The most remarkable aspect of Ren Bonian’s color application lies not in the number of colors used, but in their precise placement. His principle can be summarized as “achieving maximum visual density with minimal pigments” —color serves not as a mere imitative representation of objects, but as a means to highlight pivotal moments of life ^[5]. Wang Xuetao once praised his “meticulous use of color, particularly with powder, unmatched by anyone in nearly a century” ^[6], accurately capturing the essence of Ren’s approach: color value resides not in quantity but in precision. In “Peacock and Peony”, Ren first outlined the peacock’s features with ink, then “while the ink was still wet, applied stone green to blend with it, creating a seamless fusion of color and ink” ^[7]. The peacock’s feathers were rendered through layered applications of cyan and ochre, while the head was colored using highly saturated phthalocyanine blue and stone green; the peony featured understated, elegant hues applied via flat washes, transforming Chen Hongshou’s classical elegance into fresh vibrancy. Where color and ink meet forms the very focal point of movement and vitality—these colors not only enhance the physiological texture of the feathers but also guide the viewer’s gaze to the peacock’s dynamic center.

3. The challenges of transformation and pathways for reconstruction: From “Learning from Its Form” to “Learning from Its Essence”

3.1. The “Misreading” in contemporary creation and the “Loss” of Ren Bonian’s logic

While Ren Bonian’s brushwork and color application logic are widely recognized in the art world, contemporary creations often reduce their engagement with this tradition to superficial imitation. Firstly, many equate generalized brush techniques with “hasty execution” —creators focus solely on speed while neglecting the fundamental principles of “suspended wrist and central tip technique” and meticulous control over details, resulting in bird claws that lack stability and branches devoid of elasticity, producing works that resemble sketches but lack expressive depth. Secondly, regarding color usage, those who prioritize elegance consider Ren Bonian’s vibrant hues as “vulgar,” while his color application followers misinterpret his “accentuating” strategy as arbitrary dabbing, leading to a disconnect between color and ink. More fundamentally, contemporary artists seldom explore how Ren Bonian achieved such effects; instead, they directly adopt his stylistic outcomes. The traditional logic of brushwork faces disintegration in the age of visual interpretation, causing the temporal dimension and internal coherence inherent in Ren Bonian’s compositions to become flattened and fragmented.

3.2. Three approaches to creative transformation

To address these challenges, this paper proposes three pathways for transitioning from merely emulating external practices to truly understanding underlying principles.

Firstly, the evolution from “sketching from life” to “expressing inner feelings”: a transformation in the subjectivity of brushwork logic. Ren Bonian’s brushwork stemmed from his keen observation of nature, whereas contemporary art creation should place greater emphasis on the painter’s subjective emotional expression. Ren Bonian’s concept of “suspended wrist and central tip technique” can be transformed into a regulatory mechanism for personal brushwork dynamics—the pace of strokes no longer serves as a passive recording of objective subjects but becomes an active manifestation of subjective emotions. As demonstrated in painter Li Encheng’s work “Youth” (partial view), the entire composition features a pale blue-gray background, with white iris flowers, light green foliage, delicate purple blossoms, and ink accents all enveloped in a hazy gray tone. The lines are delicate yet elastic, capturing the swaying motion of plants in the wind; the washes are translucent and subtle, devoid of any heavy-handed craftsmanship. Rather than pursuing photographic realism, the work captures the essence of nature, allowing viewers almost to smell the fragrance of vegetation and feel the flow of wind—this exemplifies the core principle of Chinese painting: prioritizing meaning over form.

Secondly, from “awakening” to “construction”: a structural evolution of color. The artistic principle of Ren Bonian—using minimal pigments to achieve maximum visual density—is expanded from localized application to comprehensive chromatic design across the entire composition. Artists may employ a unified color palette while introducing high-purity color blocks at key focal points, preserving traditional harmony between color and ink while enhancing modern compositional impact. As seen in Deng Yuanqing’s work “Evening Snow”, the entire background adopts a medium-dark gray tone, mirroring twilight conditions. The contrast in luminance between flowers, butterflies, and the background is deliberately minimized, blending these elements seamlessly into the evening atmosphere. Yet subtle fluorescent highlights or tiny light spots on flower centers and lizard heads stand out remarkably within the overall low-luminance, low-purity context. These details serve as both reflections of natural light and focal points that capture viewers’ attention. Thus, color not only “awakens” life but also “constructs” emotions and spatial perception.

Thirdly, from “instant” to “image”: the abstract elevation of brush and ink language. Ren Bonian captures fleeting moments of nature, which contemporary artists can refine into more universal images. He liberates the angular lines of branches and the rounded forms of flowers and leaves from specific objects, transforming them into independent visual symbols with aesthetic value that can be employed in more structured compositions. This does not represent a rejection of tradition but rather elevates traditional expression techniques to a purer visual realm, revitalizing Ren Bonian’s artistic approach within the contemporary context. Once again, the works of painter Li Encheng serve as an example. For example, in his work “Life Forms”, the upper half of the canvas features extensive splashes of bluish-green, creating a vigorous, freehand aesthetic. The artist does not confine himself to any specific subject; viewers may interpret this area as grasslands or forests. The upper section is rendered with large, soft green washes forming smooth planes, while the lower part employs densely and sparsely arranged angular lines that constitute a linear structure resembling grass stems, interspersed with various insects—a composition with distinct formal characteristics that embodies vivid vitality. The work retains the refined elegance of traditional boneless painting while delivering a strong contemporary visual impact.

4. Conclusion

This study examines the brushwork and color application logic in Ren Bonian’s flower-and-bird paintings, proposing three pathways for “creative transformation,” whose value is demonstrated through three

contemporary works. First, “From Sketching to Expressing the Heart”: Taking Li Encheng’s “Fanghua” as an example, the work integrates boneless painting techniques with water, ink, and color, transforming Ren Bonian’s dynamic capture of natural subjects into a profound expression of everyday life—a leap from “imitating form” to “capturing essence.” Second, “From Highlighting Details to Constructing Atmosphere”: Using Deng Yuanqing’s “Muxue”, this approach expands Ren Bonian’s technique of highlighting specific elements into a comprehensive emotional tone construction, replacing vibrant colors with gray tones and refined details with softness, elevating color from a mere “narrative device” to a “fundamental emotional anchor.” Third, “From Instant Moments to Symbolic Images”: Through Li Encheng’s “Shengling”, the study distills Ren Bonian’s fleeting observations of nature into universal life imagery, exploring contemporary aesthetic expressions while preserving the traditions of boneless painting.

Certainly, this paper has several limitations: the three approaches primarily rely on case studies rather than systematic empirical support; insufficient attention is given to the social conditions required for transformation and audience reception mechanisms; the boundaries of “creative transformation” remain unclear, with criteria for determining when a work enters the realm of contemporary innovation requiring further refinement. Future research could focus on two directions: first, integrating Ren Bonian’s artistic logic with visual psychology to explore the scientific foundations of “spatial hierarchy” and “breath rhythm” at the viewing level; second, extending analysis to broader contemporary painters’ practices to establish an evaluation framework spanning individual cases to collective trends. Ren Bonian’s significance lies not merely in his artistic achievements but in providing a methodology for “keeping tradition alive in the contemporary context” —a framework whose enduring vitality stems from its perpetual potential for reactivation.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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