

A Study on the Artistic Characteristics of Experimental Ink Painting: A Dual Examination from Image Expression to Spiritual Core

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Abstract: Against the backdrop of globalized artistic convergence and the transformation of contemporary art, the modernist innovation and crosscultural development of traditional ink-and-wash have become pivotal issues in Chinese contemporary art research. As one of the core modalities in the modernization of ink-and-wash, experimental ink-and-wash breaks free from the formal constraints of traditional practice and achieves a comprehensive restructuring of pictorial language, symbolic systems, and spiritual connotations. Taking experimental ink-and-wash as its primary object of inquiry, and grounded in a dual perspective that examines both visual representation and spiritual core, this paper systematically reviews the origins and developmental trajectory of experimental ink-and-wash theory, clarifies its essential concepts and academic implications, analyzes the external visual features of its pictorial language, explores the generative logic and constructive principles of its artistic symbolic forms, and constructs an integrated analytical framework of “concept–language–symbol.” On this basis, the paper differentiates the breakthroughs and continuities of experimental ink-and-wash in relation to traditional ink-and-wash, delineates the path of the contemporary turn of traditional ink-and-wash within cross-cultural artistic contexts, thereby providing historical reference and theoretical support for the modern advancement, crosscultural dissemination, and theoretical construction of Chinese contemporary ink-and-wash, and offering insights and references for the contemporary innovative practice of traditional art.

Keywords: Experimental ink-and-wash; Visual language; Symbolic forms

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1. Introduction

In the context of globalized contemporary art, traditional Chinese ink-and-wash art has encountered an identity crisis, rendering the transition from tradition to modernity a matter of urgent necessity. As Pi Daojian has observed, since the early twentieth century, the continuous evolution of modern life and the ever-increasing frequency of cross-cultural exchanges have gradually eroded the social foundation upon which traditional Chinese ink-and-wash art originally depended, thus endowing the transformation of traditional ink-and-wash with highly pressing practical significance^[1]. However, the transformation that took place in the

1980s was largely characterized by imitation and replication of Western modern art, which significantly constrained the developmental space of Chinese ink-and-wash art itself. To address this, in the 1990s, Chinese ink-and-wash art embarked on a shift from “Western dependence” toward “local regression,” with artists beginning to articulate indigenous Chinese modernity through individualized artistic languages shaped by the intrinsic qualities of Chinese ink-and-wash and the actual cultural milieu. This process gave rise to various forms of modern ink-and-wash art, including experimental ink-and-wash, conceptual ink-and-wash, expressionist ink-and-wash, and abstract ink-and-wash. This period constitutes a significant historical turning point in the development of Chinese art.

2. The emergence of the theory of experimental ink-and-wash

Experimental ink-and-wash art germinated in the 1980s and rose to prominence in the 1990s. During the 1980s, with the large-scale introduction and permeation of Western learning, the Chinese art sphere was impacted by Western modern art, which accelerated self-renewal and diversified exploration within the artistic community. Modern artistic concepts spread rapidly, prompting internal structural adjustments and a transformation of linguistic forms within traditional inkandwash art. By the 1990s, the relationship between artistic production and social structure had grown increasingly complex, and the tension between aesthetic ideals and practical mechanisms deepened continuously. Artistic expression came under the influence of multiple factors, while value judgments and cultural stances became more diversified. Critics and scholars in the theoretical field engaged in sustained discussions on the modern transformation of ink-and-wash language from various academic perspectives, producing a body of influential research outcomes.

In 1985, Li Xiaoshan published *My Views on Contemporary Chinese Painting* in Jiangsu Pictorial, in which he made the sharp criticism that “Chinese painting has reached a dead end”^[2]. This triggered a widespread debate within the art community on the reform and development of Chinese ink-and-wash art, later referred to in academic circles as the ‘85 New Wave Art Movement. In 1993, when Huang Zhuan edited the *Guangdong Artists – Experimental Ink-and-Wash* Special Issue, he introduced the term “experimental inkandwash” for the first time^[3], using it to describe those emerging forms of inkandwash art that were innovative, experimental, and avantgarde in nature. From that point on, the conceptual framework of Chinese painting underwent a transformation. Liu Zijian argued that “experimental inkandwash” refers to art that, within the current of modernism, persists in using traditional inkandwash materials, while each individual practice deviates from traditional inkandwash norms and academic inkandwash^[4]. Pi Daojian maintained that the emergence of experimental inkandwash has truly given rise to a pluralistic artistic landscape in contemporary Chinese inkandwash painting, forming an orderly experimental inkandwash art system that maintains the tension between tradition and modernity and possesses creative vitality^[5]. Chinese Experimental Ink-and-Wash in the 1990s^[6] can be considered the first publication to use “experimental inkandwash” in its title. Its significance lies in delimiting experimental inkandwash within the domain of “nonfigurative” art, and the works of ten artists including Liu Zijian seemed to provide justification for confining experimental inkandwash to “abstract inkandwash”^[7]. Although this diverges considerably from Lu Hong’s later view, in which he referred to inkandwash paintings that reflect social reality as “experimental inkandwash”^[8], these perspectives

nonetheless offer valuable reference for the present study. In 1996, the “Symposium on Chinese Modern Ink-and-Wash Art Toward the 21st Century” was successfully held at South China Normal University in Guangzhou, marking the formal entry of experimental ink-and-wash into the public view of Chinese contemporary art. The year 1996 is thus regarded as the starting point of experimental ink-and-wash art.

With the systematic examination of contemporary Chinese ink-and-wash in international art historical research, experimental ink-and-wash has gradually attracted increasing attention due to the avantgarde nature of its artistic language and has been incorporated into the discourse system of contemporary art.

3. Conceptual connotation of experimental ink-and-wash

Experimental ink-and-wash is an art form that employs traditional ink-and-wash materials as its core medium while extending the language of painting into installation, digital, performance, and conceptual practices. Its connotation is broad, encompassing highly subjective distorted imagery, symbolic schemata, expressionistic ink painting, material collage, and conceptual ink installations and performance art that primarily use ink materials as their main medium^[9].

Since its emergence, experimental ink-and-wash has been situated within the dual tension between tradition and modernity, and between indigenous and foreign art. Its development has revolved around two major core issues: the structural transformation and linguistic renewal of the traditional ink-and-wash system, and the absorption, transformation, and subjective response to external artistic resources. The key to achieving a modernist breakthrough in ink-and-wash art lies in a deep deconstruction of the linguistic system and pictorial mechanisms of traditional ink-and-wash, thereby accomplishing a reconstruction of the traditional paradigm of bi-mo (brush-and-ink).

Driven by modern artistic concepts, experimental ink-and-wash reexamines and reinterprets the core category of bi-mo in traditional inkandwash, clarifying its ontological properties and creative value, and constructing a new contemporary inkandwash linguistic system. In the practice of experimental ink-and-wash, bi-mo gradually sheds its established symbolic meanings and cultural accretions, returning to a state of media materials that can be manipulated and recombined. Artists break away from traditional prescribed conventions and technical logics, reestablishing the relationships among brush, ink, and paper, transforming them from representational tools into generative mechanisms, thereby giving rise to new visual grammars and creative pathways. This shift not only signifies an update in formal language, but also marks a rerecognition and reconstruction of the ontology of ink-and-wash art within the contemporary context. Artists’ creative approaches generally manifest in two directions: one emphasizes metaphysical philosophical speculation, foregrounding conceptual construction and the spiritual dimension; the other takes materiality as its point of departure, turning the properties of the medium into the core driving force of formal generation. This turn implies that traditional ink-and-wash works gradually move from a mode of expression primarily based on pictorial narration toward a deep restructuring guided by conceptual orientation. From the perspective of viewing, artists, works, and audiences are placed within the same aesthetic relationship; viewing is no longer a oneway reception but becomes a process of participation in meaning generation, thus promoting the reproduction of the visual language of ink-and-wash, and reflecting the re-organization and transcendence of one’s own cultural resources within the context of the intersection of Chinese and Western cultures.

4. Visual language of experimental ink-and-wash

In the 1990s, experimental ink-and-wash gained widespread academic recognition through sustained media experimentation and conceptual innovation, gradually breaking free from the conventional constraints of traditional ink-and-wash and establishing an independent and comprehensive visual language and symbolic system, thereby securing its distinctive identity within the contemporary art context.

4.1. Defiguration: The construction of abstract imagery

The construction of the visual language system of experimental ink-and-wash has been profoundly influenced by Western modernism. It thoroughly dismantles traditional ink-and-wash art's dependence on the concrete forms of objects, shifting away from representing the outlines of things and instead conveying the artist's concepts and reflections through abstract expressions of objects.

The abstractness of imagery constitutes a core characteristic of experimental ink-and-wash, manifesting primarily in two forms: conceptual abstraction and formal abstraction. Conceptual abstraction emphasizes the artist's active dissolution of the object's external form, transforming the invisible inner spirit and thought into visible visual metaphors through the medium of ink and wash. The work no longer appears as a specific "object"; the figurative elements of traditional schemata are entirely discarded and replaced by more open abstract imagery, wherein psychological experience and visual perception merge and ultimately crystallize into abstract images. Formal abstraction, on the other hand, focuses on the deconstruction of traditional brush-and-ink conventions. Although traditional brush and ink materials are retained, their formulaic usages are disassembled and reorganized, and the artist reconstructs an abstract pictorial order through pure material expression and visual composition.

4.2. Reschematization: The generation of ink traces

Schiller held that "the essence of art is appearance" ^[10]. The presentation of visible artistic imagery is the central objective of all visual art creation. Unlike the formulaic and standardized schema system of traditional ink-and-wash, experimental ink-and-wash, grounded in the materiality of the medium and driven by contemporary concepts, has given rise to a new visual form centered on ink schemata and trace-based imagery.

The visual traces of experimental ink-and-wash are the materialized visual outcomes generated through the interaction of media such as water, ink, and rice paper, and their generative mechanism is shaped by both formal structure and creative techniques. At the formal level, the composition, density, sparsity, void-solid relationship, and rhythm of the work constitute the overall visual order, determining the overarching framework of the image. At the creative level, the dynamic processes of ink blooming, collision, superimposition, and penetration produce distinctive surface marks. The combination of these two aspects jointly shapes the visual form of experimental ink-and-wash. This trace-based, aleatory mode of schema generation thoroughly breaks through the singular and rigid structure of traditional inkandwash schemata, incorporates diverse contemporary visual experiences, and imbues inkandwash art with a renewed contemporary significance.

4.3. Strong visuality: Reshaping of pictorial tension

Visual tension is a vital manifestation of the contemporaneity of experimental ink-and-wash, encompassing both the visual impact and the inner spiritual force of the picture. It is primarily achieved through two dimensions—the innovation of formal language and the breakthrough in creative techniques—and constitutes

a core marker that distinguishes experimental ink-and-wash from the warm, restrained, and introspective aesthetic character of traditional ink-and-wash.

At the level of formal language, experimental ink-and-wash breaks through the limitations of pure ink materials by actively incorporating mixed media such as gold leaf, acrylic, and metals, thus achieving a fusion and interplay between traditional ink materials and modern composite media. The introduction of diverse media greatly expands the expressive boundaries of ink art, removes the aesthetic constraints of traditional brush-and-ink conventions, and endows the picture with both the warm texture of indigenous ink and the layered qualities of modern materials, resulting in a rich, multi-layered, and distinctly modern visual effect that effectively reinforces the visual tension of the work.

At the level of creative techniques, experimental ink-and-wash abandons the fixed paradigm of traditional painting—namely, “brush following form and form governing ink”—and no longer takes precise figuration as a prerequisite for creation. Instead, it relies on the natural physical reactions between water and ink, exploiting the randomness and contingency of ink smudging, permeation, and collision, combined with the superposition and combination of different materials, to produce naturally dynamic, richly varied picture textures, thus generating a highly textured and impactful visual effect.

4.4. Materiality of media: A turn in ink-and-wash aesthetics

Experimental ink-and-wash thoroughly transforms the traditional aesthetic orientation that emphasizes “artistic conception and charm,” shifting instead toward an in-depth exploration of the material properties of the media themselves. Creation no longer deliberately pursues the poetic expression and subtle suggestiveness of brush-and-ink, but focuses on the physical attributes and visual characteristics of the materials themselves, respecting the natural presentation effects of ink, rice paper, and composite materials, thereby shaping a picture style that is plain, pure, and strongly contemporary in texture. This creative exploration, grounded in media innovation and conceptual transformation, is not a simple subversion of traditional ink-and-wash; rather, on the basis of continuing indigenous artistic genes, it incorporates modern artistic formal concepts and creative thinking, promoting the transformation of ink-and-wash from a traditional aesthetic vehicle into an artistic medium that carries contemporary ideas and conveys diverse concepts, thus constructing a new visual language system that is both locally rooted and contemporary.

5. Symbolic forms of experimental ink-and-wash

In the context of contemporary art, experimental ink-and-wash has systematically deconstructed the figurative narrative system of traditional ink-and-wash. Traditional ink-and-wash relies on objective imagery for semantic expression, using figurative forms to convey emotional and conceptual connotations, with artistic expression always attached to the representational logic of natural objects. Experimental ink-and-wash breaks through the constraints of traditional formulaic creation, establishing symbol construction and aesthetic metaphor as its core creative paradigm, thereby generating a symbolic visual form system distinct from traditional ink-and-wash.

5.1. Image transformation: From figurative objects to abstract symbols

Traditional ink-and-wash is based on figurative objects, conveying visual information and emotional

expression through the depiction of “form” (xing), with imagery always revolving around the representational logic of natural objects. Experimental ink-and-wash, however, thoroughly breaks the traditional paradigm of “binding form and meaning,” deconstructing the figurative representational system of traditional ink-and-wash, establishing abstract symbols as the core unit of visual expression, and achieving the separation and reconstruction of “form” and “meaning.”

In the mechanism of symbolic image transformation, creators no longer adhere to the reproduction and imitation of objective natural objects. Instead, they take individual psychological experience, spiritual perception, and subjective thought as the core of creation. Relying on the unique permeability, randomness, and contingency inherent in ink and rice paper media, they transform intangible inner experience into tangible abstract visual symbols, accomplishing a complete translation from inner spiritual experience to outer visual structure. This transformative process thoroughly dissolves the narrativity and representational quality of traditional imagery, liberating the visual forms of ink-and-wash from the constraints of objective objects, forming an independent and autonomous symbolic visual order, and providing formal support for the free expression of concepts.

5.2. Spiritual transformation: From visual form to conceptual vehicle

The symbolic construction of experimental ink-and-wash is not merely a formal innovation; its deeper value lies in the translation and sublimation of artistic spirit, achieving an advancement from superficial visual form to profound conceptual vehicle. Compared with traditional ink-and-wash, which conveys subtle emotions and aspirations through figurative artistic conception, experimental ink-and-wash dissolves and reorganizes traditional brush-and-ink procedures, transforming abstract thoughts and emotions into perceptible visual symbols, thereby elevating symbols beyond mere pictorial elements to become spiritual media carrying concepts and emotions.

In the process of spiritual transformation, the material properties of ink and rice paper play a crucial role. The material attributes of ink and rice paper—such as permeation and gradation, layered superimposition, random collision, absorption texture, and textural tension—are deeply integrated with the formal structure of abstract symbols. This integration not only shapes a highly contemporary formal tension in the pictorial surface but also endows symbols with rich intellectual dimensions and spiritual connotations. Ultimately, it constructs a complete visual language system in which form and concept coexist, and materiality and spirituality are unified, achieving a contemporary upgrade in the spiritual expression of ink-and-wash art.

5.3. Value transformation: From formal innovation to contemporary empowerment

The core transformation of the symbolic form of experimental ink-and-wash lies in propelling ink-and-wash art from the traditional “representational image paradigm” to the contemporary “generative symbolic structural paradigm,” thoroughly subverting the semantic system of traditional ink-and-wash centered on figurative narration.

In this transformational process, aesthetic metaphor and symbolic construction mutually support each other: the former provides the conceptual core and directional meaning, while the latter supplies the visual realization path, thus forming a unified structure of concept and form. From a broader perspective of art development, this mechanism both continues the native cultural genes of ink-and-wash art and absorbs the conceptual methods of modern art, achieving the contemporary transformation of traditional resources.

6. Conclusion

From the perspective of art history, experimental inkandwash stands as one of the representative artistic modalities in the modern transformation of traditional Chinese ink-and-wash art. Through an investigation into its artistic characteristics, it becomes evident that experimental ink-and-wash, on the one hand, is rooted in the medium foundation and cultural genes of traditional Chinese inkandwash art, inheriting the latter's spiritual core that values emotional expression and artistic conception. On the other hand, it actively assimilates the concepts and creative methodologies of Western modernist art, thereby achieving a creative transformation and innovative restructuring of traditional ink-and-wash media. The standardized construction of the visual language and symbolic forms of experimental inkandwash has innovated the creative logic and expressive paradigms of traditional inkandwash, enriched the modes of visual expression in contemporary ink-and-wash art, and furnished significant practical pathways and theoretical references for the transitional development of traditional Chinese art.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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