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Composite Media Painting in the New Era: Development Trajectory, Creative Methodology Innovation, and the Case of Northeastern Regional Practice

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Abstract: Composite media painting is a highly representative emerging art form in the transformation of contemporary Chinese easel art. Since its introduction into China in the 1980s, it has evolved through three stages—imitation and borrowing, integration and transformation, and independent innovation—gradually developing into a contemporary art system that is cross-media, cross-genre, concept-oriented, and responsive to the times. In the context of the New Era, driven by technological iteration, the upgrading of ecological concepts, and the awakening of indigenous cultural consciousness, the creative logic of composite media painting has undergone profound changes: it has broken through the superficial creative model of "piling up materials and splicing techniques," and achieved systematic innovation across conceptual cognition, material ethics, technological intervention, cultural translation, and epochal paradigms. Meanwhile, regional cultural contexts profoundly shape the linguistic temperament and aesthetic form of composite media painting. Rooted in the unique natural environment, revolutionary history, and industrial cultural heritage of Northeast China, northeastern composite media painting has developed a regional artistic style characterized by grandeur, simplicity, robustness, and openness, and has continuously accomplished disciplinary evolution and talent accumulation through the academy-based teaching system and projects funded by the National Arts Fund. By tracing the domestic development trajectory of composite media painting and systematically elaborating on the innovative dimensions of creative methodology in the New Era, this paper takes northeastern regional creation as a case study to analyze its regional aesthetic characteristics and academic inheritance pathways, with a view to providing theoretical reference for the localization, contemporaneity, and systematization of contemporary composite media painting.

Keywords: Composite media painting; New Era; Creative methodology; Regional culture; Contemporary art

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1. Introduction

Composite media painting, as an important product of media innovation in contemporary art, has broken through the fixed boundaries that once separated traditional Chinese painting, oil painting, and printmaking. Characterized by the integration of multiple media, compatibility of diverse techniques, and openness of concepts, it has become a significant breakthrough in the modernization of Chinese easel art [1]. In contrast to traditional painting, which emphasizes technical norms and the reproduction of visual objects, composite media painting places greater emphasis on the unity of material properties, creative concepts, contemporary context, and cultural connotations, thereby realizing an artistic upgrade from "visual reproduction" to "spiritual expression" [2]. After more than four decades of development, composite media painting has completed the localization of Western paradigms, maturing steadily in thematic expression, media language, creative thinking, and exhibition systems. Entering the New Era, the evolving social and cultural context, the advances in science and technology, the rise of ecological aesthetics, and the construction of cultural confidence have jointly propelled composite media painting into a new stage of methodological innovation. Meanwhile, regional culture, as the deep-rooted soil of artistic creation, has shaped the distinctive artistic temperament of composite media painting across different regions. Among them, northeastern composite media painting, rooted in the profound black-soil culture, the revolutionary "red spirit," and industrial memory, has developed a highly recognizable regional artistic paradigm, establishing itself as a typical example of regional innovation in contemporary composite media painting.

2. The development trajectory and evolution of composite media painting in China

The development of composite media painting in China began against the backdrop of cultural opening-up in the 1980s, when Western modernist art trends and concepts of multimedia were introduced into the country, bringing an entirely new artistic vision to the traditional painting system. Deriving from the Western concept of "mixed media," composite media painting was developed by Chinese artists who, on the basis of drawing on the Western modernist art system, combined it with China's indigenous aesthetic context and creative needs to gradually construct a localized composite media painting system suited to the development of contemporary Chinese art. This broke the long-established creative pattern in which traditional painting categories were strictly separated, giving rise to an open, pluralistic, and flexibly innovative form of contemporary artistic expression.

In the 1980s, the introduction of numerous international classic art exhibitions into China became a crucial opportunity for the germination and development of composite media painting. In particular, the 1985 touring exhibition of Robert Rauschenberg's modern art in China, with its subversive creative philosophy of "art is life," challenged the entrenched painting conventions of Chinese artists and greatly advanced the development of the "85 New Wave" art movement (**Figure 1**). Young artists broke through the constraints of traditional painting one after another, began to explore the expressive possibilities of diverse materials, and thoroughly dismantled the traditional aesthetic paradigm of single-medium realism, thereby laying the ideological and practical foundation for composite media painting to take root and thrive in China.

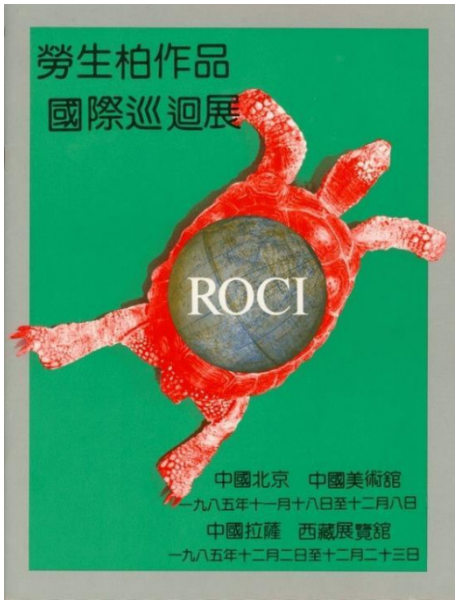


Figure 1. Poster of the 1985 international touring exhibition of Rauschenberg's works

In 2010, the China Artists Association established the Art Committee of Composite Media Painting and Artwork Conservation & Restoration (Composite Media Painting and Conservation & Restoration Art Committee), marking China's official entry into a professionalized, institutionalized, and systematized stage of development for composite media painting. After more than three decades of iterative evolution, composite media painting has completed a full transformation from initially imitating the West and incorporating traditional elements to grounding itself in the local context and pursuing independent innovation. At the level of creation, it has broken free from the limitations of the single technique and single language of traditional painting, realizing a fundamental shift of materials from physical carriers to spiritual carriers. At the current stage, the subject matter of composite media painting has become increasingly diverse, encompassing red narratives, contemporary realities, local humanistic themes, and avant-garde experiments, achieving a deep fusion of material properties, painting techniques, individual emotion, and the spirit of the times. Today, composite media painting has become an important emerging form of Chinese easel art, epitomizing the inclusiveness, innovativeness, and contemporaneity of contemporary Chinese art, and serving as a significant artistic vehicle for the innovative development of literature and art in the New Era.

3. The systematic innovation of creative methodology in composite media painting in the new era

Entering the New Era, the creative logic of composite media painting has completely broken away from the superficial experimental model of "piling up materials and splicing techniques" that prevailed in its early stages, giving rise to a systematic creative methodology centered on the sublimation of concepts, the reconstruction of materials, the empowerment of technology, cultural translation, and the construction of the times. In this way, it has achieved multidimensional and synergistic innovation across media, technology, culture, concepts, and the era.

3.1. Innovation of creative concepts: From the expression of material properties to spiritual narrative

The artistic vision determines the artistic pattern, and the evolution of creative concepts lies at the core of innovation in composite media painting. Materials themselves possess rich textural features and multiple dimensions of interpretation, but the mere presentation of their physicality belongs only to a "form-below" (material) visual expression [3]. Only by elevating concepts through artistic philosophy and humanistic conviction can a "form-beyond" (metaphysical) spiritual narrative be achieved. Picasso proposed that artistic creation is a reconstruction of subjective cognition rather than a replication of objective forms, establishing the core position of "concept-led media" in contemporary material-based creation [4]. With material properties serving as the vehicle of creation and spiritual aspirations as its core, the two are mutually constructed, constituting the complete value system of composite media painting.

The philosophy of German Expressionism and the creative practice of Anselm Kiefer further demonstrate that mature contemporary art must necessarily possess profound spiritual pursuit and cultural reflection. Composite media painting in the New Era abandons the superficial creation of formalism and entertainment, constructing the creative concept of "medium as the body, spirit as the soul," and integrating the spirit of the times, humanistic reflection, and cultural identity into the language of materials. In this way, works are elevated from mere visual aesthetics to spiritual texts that carry the emotions of the era, cultural memory, and artistic conviction.

3.2. Innovation of material ethics: From the consumption of traditional consumables to the construction of sustainable media

Traditional painting materials are characterized primarily by single consumables, one-time consumption, and fixed physical properties, with the logic of material use confined to serving technique. In the New Era, the concept of ecological civilization has driven a comprehensive reconstruction of material ethics in composite media painting, enabling the logic of material selection to achieve a multidimensional unity of practicality, aesthetics, ecological sustainability, and emotional resonance.

First, a regenerative material system has gradually taken shape. Contemporary creation actively explores the artistic regeneration of waste materials: by integrating construction debris, glass fragments, and discarded everyday materials, a recyclable resource pool of art materials has been built, with a material utilization rate of over 73%, forming a low-carbon, environmentally friendly, and sustainable model of artistic creation that resonates in harmony with ecological principles [5]. Second, intelligent new materials and biological media are increasingly intervening in creation. Novel media such as photochromic coatings, temperature-sensitive smart materials, and fungal mycelium have broken the static and fixed mode of display of traditional painting, endowing works with contemporary characteristics of dynamic evolution and growth and change, greatly expanding the media boundaries and spatiotemporal dimensions of composite media painting.

Meanwhile, material selection in the New Era adheres to the principle of material-property matching: on the basis of ensuring practical attributes such as durability, plasticity, and corrosion resistance, it explores the temperament and textural emotion inherent in materials themselves, so that material properties are highly aligned with the themes and emotional expression of the work, making the medium itself an integral part of the work's narrative [6].

3.3. Innovation of creative technology: An artistic production revolution driven by technological intervention

"The fusion of art and science" is the most distinctive development trend of composite media painting in the New Era. The intervention of a cluster of modern technologies has reconstructed the creative workflow, media-processing methods, and display-and-dissemination systems of traditional painting, giving rise to a new creative paradigm that is precise, digital, and scientific.

At the stage of material pre-treatment, precision instruments such as fluorescence spectrometers can accurately analyze the composition and structure of antique pigments and natural materials, facilitating the scientific replication and inheritance of traditional techniques and providing technical support for the contemporary revitalization of traditional artistic language. At the stage of creative experimentation, intelligent art laboratories can simulate the mixed textures and color effects of diverse materials, effectively reducing material loss and enhancing the precision and innovativeness of creation. At the level of display and dissemination, blockchain technology enables the traceability of material provenance and the confirmation of copyright, while VR (virtual reality) technology constructs immersive viewing environments that allow audiences to deeply perceive the origins of materials and the logic of creation, strengthening the interactivity and narrativity of works. By empowering creation through technology, composite media painting breaks through the spatiotemporal limitations of traditional creation, achieving a symbiotic coexistence of technological aesthetics and artistic aesthetics.

3.4. Innovation of cultural language: The contemporary translation of indigenous cultural symbols

For a long time, composite media painting in China largely drew upon the media language system of the West, giving rise to the problem of a "loss of voice" in indigenous culture. A major breakthrough in creative methodology in the New Era lies in grounding itself in indigenous cultural genes and achieving the contemporary translation and artistic reconstruction of traditional folk cultural symbols. Folk art forms such as shadow puppetry, paper-cutting, New Year paintings, pottery figurines, clay sculpture, Peking Opera facial makeup, and traditional opera carry the Eastern aesthetic paradigm and the memory of national culture, and serve as the core resources for the localized creation of composite media painting.

By deconstructing traditional symbols, reorganizing media textures, and integrating diverse techniques, contemporary creators blend unadorned folk aesthetics and a profound national ethos into the language of composite media painting. Relying on indigenous media such as mineral pigments, traditional fabrics, and folk materials, and combining comprehensive techniques including cutting and pasting, abrasion, layering and pressing, and texture shaping, they break the monopoly of Western media discourse and construct a contemporary material-painting language system imbued with Chinese character, Chinese substance, and Chinese aesthetics [7]. In this way, composite media painting has become an important vehicle for manifesting cultural confidence and disseminating the indigenous cultural lineage.

3.5. Innovation of the epochal paradigm: A refined creative path grounded in the contemporary context

Artistic creation in the new era must take root in the context of the times, align with public aesthetics, and carry the spirit of the age; formal experiments divorced from reality do not possess sustainable artistic vitality. Composite media painting adheres to the creative principle of "grounded in tradition, rooted in

the times, respectful of material properties, and highlighting the spirit," placing emphasis on excavating the natural beauty and humanistic beauty embedded in raw materials, time-worn textures, and weathered marks. Through original media such as old fabric, rusted textures, and the texture of ancient books, it carries historical memory and cultural sentiment.

At the same time, composite media painting in the new era has constructed a multidimensional creative path of "art + science + culture + the times." With cross-disciplinary, cross-media, and cross-cultural thinking, it breaks through the limitations of a single art category, integrating traditional techniques, modern technology, indigenous culture, and the spirit of the times. This avoids the superficial problems of mere material piling, hollow forms, and empty emotion, and drives composite media painting to advance from formal innovation to spiritual innovation and from imitative borrowing to independent construction, forming a refined creative paradigm suited to the needs of literature and art development in the new era.

4. The construction of a case study of composite media painting from a regional perspective — The example of northeastern creation

Region is not merely a concept of natural space; it is a comprehensive cultural field encompassing geographical landscape, historical memory, humanistic spirit, and social ecology. The formation of regional art is not a simple piling up of surface-level symbols, but rather the result of the long-term immersion in a regional environment, historical lineage, and collective spirit. The distinctive temperament of northeastern composite media painting does not rely on external labels such as ice and snow, industry, or folk customs, but is rooted in the collective aesthetic accumulation of the black-soil landscape, the revolutionary red history, the pioneering spirit of the Great Northern Wilderness, and the memory of building the old industrial base, internalized as the shared creative temperament and spiritual foundation of northeastern artists.

The vast black-soil terrain and the bitter, freezing snow-and-ice climate of Northeast China have shaped a natural aesthetic context that is grand, desolate, and broad in scale; the red spirit of the Northeast Anti-Japanese United Army, the course of heavy-industry construction, and the pioneering sentiments of the Great Northern Wilderness have built a regional spiritual lineage that is resilient, unadorned, vigorous, and profound. Artists long immersed in this regional field have their spatial experience, life experience, and historical memory deeply bound to the northeastern cultural lineage, and their creations naturally reveal a profound sense of regional identity. As a result, northeastern composite media painting presents artistic traits distinct from the gentle elegance of Jiangnan, the agile liveliness of the Southwest, and the avant-garde edge of the coastal regions: the overall picture is bold and sweeping, vigorous and weighty, using hard-edged linear segmentation and block-like structures to shape pictorial order, highlighting a distinctive rigid aesthetics and majestic bearing.

Viewed through the results of national exhibitions, northeastern composite media painting possesses a distinctive academic identity. In the composite media painting section of the 14th National Exhibition of Fine Arts, the selected northeastern works displayed a high degree of regional commonality in creative methods, material handling, and aesthetic orientation. Among them, Xia Jinghan's work Folk Ballad (**Figure 2**), selected as an outstanding work for the Beijing exhibition, epitomizes the artistic characteristics of northeastern composite media painting. Taking five women performing folk ballads as the main subjects, the work features concise and highly generalized figural modeling with interplay between the substantial and the ethereal; the lines of the skirts are firm yet supple, revealing a rigid skeleton beneath a gentle demeanor. The

picture is built up layer upon layer in deep, interweaving reds and blacks, creating a rich and weighty rustic atmosphere.



Figure 2. Xia Jinghan, Folk Ballad, rice paper (xuan paper), acrylic, and other media, 180 × 210 cm, 2024

In terms of the use of material language, the work employs paper-based composite media as its vehicle, releasing the physical properties of materials with restraint and precision, achieving a high degree of balance between the characteristics of the medium and thematic expression. Through linear architecture and geometric segmentation, it distills everyday life experience; replacing surface-level visual realism with the authenticity of inner emotion, it thoroughly internalizes the physicality of materials into the spiritual narrative of the picture. Transcending the surface appearance of objects and refining artistic form through inward contemplation of the mind, the work possesses a rich and profound tone that combines historical sublimity with the simplicity of life, releasing a vigorous and fervent rustic vitality, and achieving a perfect symbiosis of material properties, painterly language, and spiritual connotation. It stands as a typical embodiment of the northeastern composite media painting style—weighty, grand, and unified in form and spirit.

The maturation of the regional style of northeastern composite media painting has relied heavily on systematic academic teaching heritage and disciplinary construction. Professor Song Xuezhi of Northeast Normal University, as a leading figure of the discipline in the region, has long been devoted to the teaching of composite media painting and the cultivation of talent. Relying on key projects of the National Arts Fund to continuously advance disciplinary innovation, he successively completed the 2018 project “Training of Talent in the Creative Techniques of Oily Egg Tempera Painting” and the 2022 project “Training of Innovative Talent in Composite Media Painting.” Building upon the college teaching system established in the 1990s, he broke through the barriers of single-genre instruction, carried out innovative interdisciplinary and cross-media teaching practices, and established a teaching system that combines traditional depth, a contemporary vision, and northeastern regional characteristics. This has continuously cultivated young creative forces, consolidated the academic foundation of northeastern composite media painting, and provided solid support in talent and theory for the inheritance and iteration of the regional style and the construction of nationwide academic influence.

5. Conclusion

As an emerging segment of contemporary Chinese art, composite media painting carries the mission of the times for the innovative development of easel art in the New Era. Its contemporaneity both absorbs the media experience of international modern art and deeply engages with the indigenous cultural context and the aesthetic needs of the times, endowing it with sustained potential for iterative development and broad room for growth. The "comprehensiveness" of contemporary composite media painting manifests itself mainly in two dimensions: first, the cross-boundary interpenetration, fusion, and symbiosis of materials and techniques; and second, the internal coherence among artistic forms, epochal narratives, and creative concepts.

Looking back over more than four decades of development, the essence of the iteration of composite media painting has been a process of the continuous liberation of artistic thought and the constant renewal of creative concepts. In the context of the New Era, composite media painting needs to persistently cast off the double constraints of traditional paradigms and entrenched thinking: grounded in the indigenous cultural lineage, empowered by science and technology, and closely aligned with the spirit of the times, it must continuously explore new paths of media innovation, cultural translation, and spiritual expression. In particular, regional composite media painting should continue to excavate indigenous cultural genes and strengthen the distinctiveness of regional art, so as to build, through upholding fundamental principles while pursuing innovation, a composite media painting system with Chinese characteristics, epochal features, and regional qualities — truly manifesting the independent value and cultural responsibility of contemporary Chinese art.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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