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A Comparative Study of Aesthetic Ontology Theories from the Perspective of Divergent Visual Concepts in Chinese and Western Art

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Abstract: This paper conducts a comparative study of the theory of artistic ontology from the perspective of the differences in visual conceptual frameworks between China and the West. By tracing China's imagery tradition of "capturing the spirit through form" and the Western representation tradition of "imitating nature," this study analyzes the essential differences between the two traditions across three dimensions: visual cognition, formal language, and aesthetic aims. The research demonstrates that the theories of artistic ontology in China and the West are rooted in their respective philosophical soils and cultural contexts, exhibiting systematic distinctions—such as the contrast between scattered perspective and focal perspective, between brushwork/ink lines and color/lighting, and between the harmony of heaven and humanity and the subject-object dichotomy. This comparative analysis contributes to deepening the multifaceted understanding of artistic ontology and provides a theoretical reference for the construction of contemporary art theory and cross-cultural dialogue.

Keywords: Image concept; Artistic ontology; Capturing the spirit through form; Imitation theory; Comparative study

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1. Introduction

The theory of the ontology of art constitutes a central issue in aesthetics and the philosophy of art, addressing fundamental questions concerning the essence of art, visual cognition, and aesthetic value. Throughout their long historical development, Chinese and Western visual arts have cultivated distinct conceptual frameworks and theoretical systems for imagery; these differences manifest not merely as superficial variations in technique and style but are deeply rooted in the structural disparities of their respective philosophical traditions, modes of thinking, and cultural psychologies. Previous scholarly investigations have predominantly focused on the systematic organization of theories within individual cultural contexts or confined themselves to parallel comparisons of styles and techniques, yet have often failed to conduct a systematic and in-depth exploration of the ontological foundations underlying the differences in their imagery

concepts. This paper takes the concept of imagery as its starting point and conducts a comparative study of the ontological theories of Chinese and Western visual arts across three dimensions—visual cognition, formal language, and aesthetic purpose—aiming to reveal their essential characteristics and internal logic, thereby providing a theoretical foundation for the dialogue and integration of cross-cultural art theory.

2. The historical origins and philosophical foundations of Chinese and Western visual concepts

2.1. China's imagery tradition of "capturing the spirit through form"

The visual conception in Chinese art originated from the distinctions between "Dao and Object" and "Language and Meaning" in pre-Qin philosophy; during the Wei, Jin, and Southern and Northern Dynasties periods, it established its theoretical foundation with the proposal of Gu Kaizhi's principle of "capturing the spirit through form" [1]. This tradition does not aim at the realistic reproduction of objective entities but emphasizes conveying the inherent spiritual essence of the subject through the refinement and generalization of form. Placing "vibrant spirit and rhythm" at the forefront among Xie He's Six Principles represents a systematic expression of this concept. Chinese painters do not seek to replicate visual illusions; instead, they pursue an integration of subject and object—where "the external is learned from nature, while the internal derives from the mind" —and a process of imagery generation in which the intention precedes the brushstroke and the meaning persists even after the painting is completed [2]. This visual conception is rooted in the holistic philosophy of Chinese thought regarding the unity of heaven and humanity, which holds that the ultimate goal of art is not to merely depict the external world but to bridge the finite brush-and-ink imagery with the infinite cosmic vitality and life-affection. Thus, the "image" in Chinese art has never been a mechanical reflection of objective entities, but rather an aesthetic imagery resulting from the fusion of the painter's subjective emotions and the objective world—a spiritual creation "between resemblance and non-resemblance." Fan Kuan's Northern Song painting *Travelers Among Streams and Mountains* (see **Figure 1**) employs majestic and expansive landscape imagery to convey the grand spiritual resonance of the universe and nature; it stands as a paradigmatic example of this imagery tradition.



Figure 1. *Travelers Among Streams and Mountains* by Fan Kuan (Northern Song Dynasty).

2.2. The Western tradition of representation through "imitating nature"

The conceptual framework of Western visual art can be traced back to the theory of imitation found in ancient Greek philosophy. Plato viewed art as an imitation of the shadowy reflection of the world of Ideas, whereas Aristotle saw imitation as an inherent human nature, asserting that art imitates both the laws of contingency and the laws of necessity governing things. This intellectual tradition was further reinforced during the Renaissance; Leonardo da Vinci explicitly described painting as "the legitimate daughter of nature," advocating that painters should take the mirror as their teacher and faithfully represent the objective world. The core pursuit of Western visual art lies in constructing a three-dimensional imaginary space that approximates visual reality through the application of scientific principles such as perspective, anatomy, and the laws of light and shadow [3]. In *On Painting*, Alberti defined painting as "a cross-section of the visual pyramid," thereby laying a theoretical foundation for representational painting from the perspectives of mathematics and optics. This conceptual approach to imagery is rooted in the Western philosophical tradition of subject–object dichotomy, which positions the subject and the object, the mind and matter, as opposing poles; thus, the mission of art is precisely the accurate perception and representation of the object by the subject. Consequently, the concept of the "image" in Western visual art has long been understood as a reflection or reproduction of objective reality, and an important criterion for measuring artistic value has been the degree of resemblance to nature. Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* (see Figure 2) employs meticulous portraiture to capture the subject's subtle expressions and psychological depth, making it a pinnacle achievement of the Western representational tradition. It was not until the rise of Impressionism and Modernism in the 19th century that this representational tradition faced fundamental challenges and was subverted.

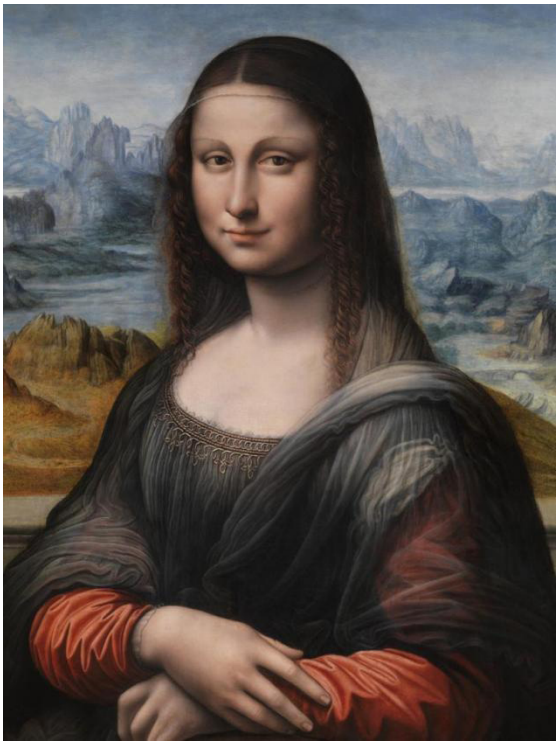


Figure 2. Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa.*

3. Ontological differences in visual cognitive approaches

3.1. Scattered perspective and dynamic space

Chinese art employs a spatial organization technique based on scattered-point perspective in its visual cognition; painters do not adhere to a single viewpoint but instead adopt an approach of "moving step by step and viewing from every angle" to integrate objects observed at different times and from various perspectives into a single composition [4]. This spatial concept breaks the limitations of a fixed viewpoint, endowing the artwork with immense freedom and inclusiveness. In landscape painting, artists can simultaneously depict distant mountains and nearby waters, as well as scenes of the four seasons and scenic views from all directions; when viewing such works, the audience experiences a "journey-like" visual journey as the composition unfolds. The "Three Distances Technique" —high distance, deep distance, and flat distance— proposed by Guo Xi in his work *High Ambitions in Forests and Springs* represents a theoretical synthesis of this multi-point-of-view spatial organization method. The essence of scattered-point perspective lies not in constructing an illusory space that conforms to the optical laws of a single viewpoint, but in conveying the overall spirit and life rhythm of natural landscapes through a dynamic sequence of viewpoints [5]. This spatial concept is closely linked to the Chinese philosophical worldview of the unity of all things and the unity of space and time; it does not regard space as a static, objective container, but as a realm within which humans exist and experience the world. The space depicted in the painting is not merely an object to be observed, but a spiritual home that can be traversed and inhabited; through this immersive "wandering" experience, the viewer enters the painted world and achieves a connection and resonance with the vitality of the universe.

3.2. Linear perspective and fixed viewpoint

Western art, in terms of visual cognition, takes focal perspective as its core principle; painters fixate on a single viewpoint and, based on the principles of geometric optics, project three-dimensional objects onto a two-dimensional plane, thereby constructing a unified space that evokes a sense of depth. The mathematical foundation of focal perspective is linear perspective, which was established through experimentation by Brunelleschi in the early fifteenth century and later theorized by scholars such as Alberti and Piero della Francesca, becoming the spatial paradigm for Western painting [6]. Within the focal perspective system, all parallel lines converge at a vanishing point on the horizon line; the size of an object decreases proportionally as its distance from the viewer increases, thus creating on the canvas a depth space that closely aligns with the viewer's actual visual experience [7]. This spatial organization places the viewer at a fixed position, enabling them to view the real scene outside the painting as if through a window. The epistemological basis of focal perspective lies in the objectivist spirit of modern Western science, which posits the existence of an objective space independent of the subject, which the subject can precisely measure and reproduce through rational methods [8]. Consequently, space in Western painting is an objective entity observed by the subject— a geometric structure that can be quantified and analyzed. This conception of space held an absolutely dominant position in Western painting from the Renaissance through the nineteenth century; it was not until Cézanne began questioning the single-point-of-view nature of focal perspective, and Cubism further deconstructed traditional space through the juxtaposition of multiple viewpoints, that the spatial concept in Western painting underwent a fundamental transformation.

4. Ontological differences in formal language systems

4.1. Vivid brushstrokes, lines, and charm

The formal language of Chinese art is centered around brush and ink, and lines are not only a means of shaping the contours of objects, but also an independent aesthetic carrier that carries the emotions, temperament, and cultivation of the painter. The lines in Chinese painting have rich expressive power and independent aesthetic value. The so-called "bone style brushwork" emphasizes the inherent strength, rhythm, and charm of the lines in painting. From Gu Kaizhi's silk spinning of spring silkworms to Wu Daozi's strip painting of water shield vegetables, from Li Gonglin's white painting to Liang Kai's reduced brushwork, Chinese painters have developed an extremely rich system of techniques and aesthetic categories in the use of lines. Brush and ink are not only formal techniques, but also the essence of Chinese painting, which is the direct externalization of the painter's spiritual world and cultural cultivation. The use of ink in Chinese painting is also unique, with ink divided into five colors: focal, thick, heavy, light, and clear. The amount of water is used to adjust the ink's intensity, dryness, and wetness, creating rich layers and charm in the monochromatic ink color changes. This aesthetic choice of using ink instead of color reflects the aesthetic ideal of Chinese aesthetics, which is "the extreme of splendor, returning to simplicity", and also embodies the Chinese philosophy's admiration for simplicity. The ultimate goal of brush and ink language is to convey the vitality and spiritual rhythm of all things in the universe through the movement and rhythm of brush and ink. Therefore, the formal language of Chinese painting is not a depiction of the appearance of objective objects, but a spiritual manifestation of the painter's communication with the universe and life through brush and ink, which is an ontological practice of technological advancement.

4.2. Color, light, shadow, and volume shaping

The formal language of Western art revolves around color, light, and shadow, shaping the sense of volume and space of objects through contrast and color gradient, and pursuing a visually realistic reproduction effect. Western painting began to explore the technique of light and shade with Giotto, and through the development of Masaccio, Leonardo da Vinci, and others, reached the pinnacle of Caravaggio's dark tonality, forming a light and shade modeling method that uses contrast to shape volume. Leonardo da Vinci proposed the method of gradual disappearance, which blurs contours and creates a sense of illusion in light and shadow similar to that of air. In terms of color, Western painting has gone through a process from fixed color to conditioned color, from local color to overall tone, while Impressionism introduced optical color theory into painting, using color juxtaposition to grasp the instantaneous changes of light in different times and environments. The expression techniques of Western painting are based on a scientific understanding of the external visual properties of things. Anatomy ensures the accuracy of human body structure, perspective ensures the rationality of spatial relationships, and color and optics provide a theoretical basis for the use of color and light. Their main goal is to accurately grasp the various visual elements in the picture and reconstruct a three-dimensional spatial illusion in a plane. Therefore, color and light in Western painting are first and foremost tools for imitating nature, with their beauty attached to the object being imitated. It was not until the modernist movement that color and lines gradually gained independent status. Kandinsky and Mondrian's abstract paintings freed formal language from the constraints of realism and made it a pure spiritual expression.

5. Ontological differences in aesthetic intentionality

5.1. Harmony between heaven and man and the creation of poetic atmosphere

The aesthetic goal of Chinese art lies in the creation of artistic conception, which conveys boundless cosmic emotions and life reflections through finite artistic imagery, achieving the aesthetic realm of unity between heaven and humanity. Artistic conception is the core category of Chinese aesthetics, composed of two dimensions: "yi" (meaning) and "jing" (scene). "Yi" refers to the painter's subjective emotions and spiritual ideals, while "jing" denotes the objective imagery and spatial atmosphere presented in the artwork. The integration of these two aspects constitutes artistic conception. Chinese painters do not strive for realistic representation but instead pursue expressiveness, seeking images beyond images, scenes beyond scenes, and meanings beyond meanings. Every mountain, river, grass, and tree in their paintings is not a mere natural object but the embodiment and symbol of the painter's spiritual character and cosmic sentiments. Ni Zan painted bamboo "to express the free spirit within," while Bada Shanren depicted fish and birds "with a white eye to the world," both projecting their subjective spirit onto objective imagery, transforming the painting into an externalization of the spiritual world [9]. The highest aesthetic realm in Chinese art is the unity of heaven and humanity, which dissolves the opposition between subject and object, merging human spirit with the cosmos. In landscape painting, the artist expresses their understanding of the cosmic way and a return to the primal truth of life through the depiction of natural mountains and rivers. Meanwhile, viewers enter a state of aesthetic experience where they forget both the self and the object, achieving harmony between heaven and humanity. This aesthetic goal determines that Chinese art must inevitably evolve toward expressiveness and abstraction, with vitality and grace as the supreme standard, and must pursue an aesthetic character of simplicity, spontaneity, and distant elegance.

5.2. Subject–object dichotomy and typical representation

The principle of typical representation has long dominated Western art's aesthetic approach—namely, grasping the essential laws of things through the refinement and generalization of concrete, sensory images to achieve a truthful understanding of the object. Since Aristotle, Western aesthetics has placed great emphasis on the cognitive dimension of art, viewing it not merely as a simulation of an object's external form but as a means of expressing its internal structure and possibilities; Horace advocated the idea of "educating through entertainment," placing significant importance on art's moral edifying function; during the Renaissance, art and science were seamlessly integrated—painters acted as scientists, exploring and depicting nature through a rational mindset, treating art as a means of understanding the world; guided by this aesthetic sensibility, Western painting sought to portray typical characters within typical settings—that is, using representative artistic imagery to reflect general social realities and the essence of human nature [10]. Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* is not merely a representation of a Florentine woman's portrait but also a profound exploration of the humanist spirit and the complexity of human nature during the Renaissance; Rembrandt's portraiture, through its mastery of light and shadow on the face, reveals the depth and diversity of the human soul. The aesthetic experience in Western art is rooted in an epistemological framework based on the subject–object dichotomy: the subject observes the artwork as an object with a tranquil mind, deriving both aesthetic pleasure and intellectual enrichment from the process of understanding and interpreting the content depicted in the work. This aesthetic orientation dictates that traditional Western art inevitably gravitates toward realism and representation, adopts the imitation of nature as its fundamental principle, and pursues the classical aesthetic ideals of harmony, proportion, and perfection. It was not until the late 19th and

early 20th centuries, with the rise of the Modernist movement, that Western art began to break free from the constraints of representational painting and shift toward expression and abstraction—marking a fundamental transformation in its aesthetic aims.

6. Conclusion

Under the overarching concept of imagery, the ontological theories of Chinese and Western art exhibit systematic differences across three dimensions: visual cognition, formal language, and aesthetic objectives. Chinese art, with "expressing the spirit through form" as its core, is characterized by scattered perspective, brush and ink techniques, and the cultivation of artistic conception, aiming for the aesthetic realm of harmony between heaven and humanity. Western art, adhering to the tradition of imitating nature, is marked by linear perspective, color and light effects, and typical representation, rooted in the epistemological soil of subject-object dichotomy. The divergence between the two is not a matter of superiority or inferiority but an inevitable product of distinct cultural traditions and philosophical modes of thinking. In the contemporary context of deepening globalization and cross-cultural dialogue, comparative studies of the ontological theories of Chinese and Western art not only contribute to a deeper understanding of their respective theoretical characteristics but also provide valuable intellectual resources for mutual learning, integration, and the innovative construction of contemporary art theory.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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