

Wu Guanzhong's Artistic Career

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ABSTRACT

Combining with Wu Guanzhong's learning experience, this paper analyzes Chinese oil painting art characteristics in different periods, and the method of integrating traditional Chinese ink and wash painting language with the western modern design language in the aspects such as modelling, colour and composition. Wu Guanzhong successfully used western painting method to show the Oriental artistic conception, and formed unique composition views and forms. With the use of concise and simple colors and free-writing lines, the painter's personal emotions, thoughts and standpoint and deep understanding of life can be expressed. On the basis of in-depth research on the essence, connotation and thought of Chinese and Western art, Wu Guanzhong found the "junction" of the integration of Chinese and Western art.

Keywords: *Wu Guanzhong, Hangzhou Academy of Art, Ink and wash painting, Oil painting, Integration of Chinese and Western art.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Wu Guanzhong (1919-2010), the People's Artist, Art Educator, and Professor of the Academy of Arts and Design of Tsinghua University, used to be an executive director of the Chinese Artists Association, a member of the Standing Committee of the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, and a Correspondence Member of the French Academy of Arts. He pays attention to sketching and advocates aesthetic thoughts of formal beauty and abstract beauty. His works are fresh and unique, fully showing the artists' keen sense of nature. He is committed to the exploration of the nationalization of oil painting and the modernization of Chinese painting. He has made great achievements in art creation and art education, and enjoys a high reputation in China and foreign countries.

2. WU GUANZHONG'S LEARNING AND TEACHING EXPERIENCE

Wu Guanzhong (1919-2010) was born in an ordinary farm in Yixing County, Jiangsu Province. His father was a rural elementary school teacher. His mother was born in a rundown family and raised silkworms and rice. Although she was illiterate, she was gifted with aesthetics. In 1936,

Wu Guanzhong entered Hangzhou Academy of Art to study Chinese and Western paintings. In the school, he received direct guidance from teachers such as Li Chaoshi, Fang Ganmin, and Pan Tianshou. Li Chaoshi and Fang Ganmin are both teachers who have returned from studying in France, but their styles of painting are different. Both Li Chaoshi's elegant style and Fang Ganmin's rigorous style left a deep impression on Wu Guanzhong. Under the careful guidance of Pan Tianshou, he copied a large number of traditional Chinese paintings. Pan Tianshou's creative spirits embodied in his paintings, as well as the momentum and style of the paintings, have become his lifelong wealth. He was not directly taught by Lin Fengmian, the principal of Hangzhou Academy of Art, and Wu Dayu, the head of the Western Painting Department, but he liked the free expression of Lin and Wu in art.

With the study of oil painting and traditional Chinese painting in Hangzhou Academy of Art, the necessary conditions for the integration of Chinese and Western paintings are provided. And then, Wu Guanzhong has a rigorous modeling foundation, Western modern art concepts, and systematic knowledge of traditional Chinese painting and good sketching habits, which will contribute to Wu Guanzhong's future artistic development. Lin Fengmian's concept of

"integrating the Chinese and Western art" guided Wu Guanzhong's artistic development. Wu Guanzhong admired Lin Fengmian's artistic proposition of "Integration of Chinese and Western paintings" and chose the art path of "Integrating Chinese and Western paintings", which laid a solid foundation for the development of art and even the formation of unique painting styles and ideas.

Wu Guanzhong likes the richness of color and emotional expressiveness of western modern painting art. In 1946, Wu Guanzhong got the opportunity to study in France at public expense with excellent grades. In 1947, he went to study in France and entered the Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts. J. M. Souverbie was the mentor. Souverbie is an important member of the Paris School of Painting, an important painter in Paris around the 1940s and 1950s, and also the academician of the French Academy. He is similar to Picasso and Braque in artistic conception. In the creation, he pays attention to the balance of the picture in French classicism painting, which has a profound impact on Wu Guanzhong's subsequent creations. The figure paintings he learned in France were even criticized to "uglify workers, peasants and soldiers". He was a "bourgeois intellectual" who had returned from studying in a capitalist country, and his body was full of toxins. Therefore, for many years after Wu Guanzhong returned to China, he had to create comic strips, propaganda posters, and New Year pictures in the style of socialist realism.

After returning to mainland China in 1951, he soon encountered the literary and artistic rectification movement and was criticized as a "bourgeois formalist fortress". During his study abroad, he created a large number of works, some of which were selected for the Spring Salon and Autumn Salon Exhibition (Paris). When his overseas study is coming to an end, Souverbie encouraged him to return to his motherland and explore and develop his own art based on traditional Chinese culture. However, Wu Guanzhong's classmates who fled to Taiwan or stayed in Europe did not suffer from the ideological unification movement of socialist realism art creation from the Communist Party of China. They maintained continuous free development on their respective artistic roads. Therefore, Wu Guanzhong once said in his later years: "If there is no reform and opening up in the 1980s, I would be a marginalized painter."

In the autumn of 1950, Wu Guanzhong returned from studying abroad. With the recommendation of Dong Xiwen, he began the teaching career at the Central Academy of Fine Arts. He introduced Western painting masters and classic works to students, taught the essence of Western modern art, and conveyed his own artistic propositions, feelings and formal rules, which was different from the mainstream art of the Chinese painting circle at that time. However, the New Chinese painting circle at that time regarded Western modern art as a scourge. Wu Guanzhong's artistic views did not conform to the policy of all art serving politics at that time, and he was criticized during the rectification movement the following year.

In 1953, Wu Guanzhong was transferred to the Department of Architecture of Tsinghua University to teach sketch and watercolor, far away from the mainstream of fine arts and the literary and artistic circles. Working at Tsinghua University, he did not give up any opportunity to paint, painted a large number of watercolors, and explored the form of painting in watercolors. He was unwilling to accept the ideological standards of aesthetics at that time, and switched from figure painting to landscape painting. Landscape painting was not the mainstream subject at that time. Without touching politics, he could explore his own artistic path with peace of mind.

In September 1956, Wu Guanzhong was transferred from Tsinghua University to the newly established Department of Fine Arts, Beijing Normal University of Art, as the director of the oil painting teaching and research section. In 1964, he was transferred to the Central Academy of Art and Design to teach basic painting courses. He spent most of his artistic life at the Central Academy of Art and Design. While teaching at Tsinghua University and Beijing Normal University of Arts, it coincided with the promotion of literary and art workers experiencing life deeply. It was common for painters to go out and sketch from life, and Wu Guanzhong began his sketching career from then on. In 1970, he and the teachers and students of the Academy of Arts and Crafts were transferred to Li Village, Huolu County, Hebei Province for labor reform. Due to the constraints of the time, he had to use the villagers' dung baskets as easels, thus giving birth to the so-called "dung-basket" school of painting.

3. WU GUANZHONG'S ARTISTIC CHARACTERISTICS OF OIL PAINTING

Wu Guanzhong's oil painting art is of high aesthetic and academic value, and has played an important role in inspiration and promotion of contemporary oil painting creation and the development of artistic concepts in China. Wu Guanzhong inherited Lin Fengmian's artistic proposition of "Integrating Chinese and Western paintings" and devoted his life to exploring the localization of Chinese oil painting. Wu Guanzhong emphasized feeling and expression, insisted on going deep into life and sketching. His works are mainly landscape paintings, including famous mountains and rivers, streets and lanes, village farmland, trees and flowers, etc. Especially, Jiangnan landscape oil painting is handsome and fresh, showing the vitality and breath of life in paintings. His works show novel themes, unique styles, fresh pictures, and concise pen and ink, which are highly generalized. In his oil painting creation, Wu Guanzhong integrated a variety of different painting techniques and developed his own unique style of oil painting creation. Judging from more than 700 oil paintings of Wu Guanzhong, his oil painting language has evolved at every stage, reflecting his spirit of continuous exploration and innovation in art. But it can be seen that his pursuit of the beauty of form and artistic conception is consistent.

3.1 *The Artistic Characteristics of 1950s-1960s*

Around the 1960s, when art served politics and reflected the reality of such a life, Chinese plastic art became a graphic story series. Under the policy of strengthening art to serve the proletariats, the workers, peasants and soldiers, the creative method of Soviet realism hindered the development of Chinese oil painting to a certain extent. The 1950s and 1960s were the times when Wu Guanzhong was exploring the integration of Chinese and Western art. He conducted a more comprehensive study on the formal language of the pictures, and pursued the best unity of the beauty of form of artistic conception. At this time, Wu Guanzhong faced the choice of subject matter and the change of style and interest. His works changed from the original modernist expression to a realistic expression technique, and the brushstrokes of the picture had more abundant changes. The subject matter of painting changed from figure painting to

landscape painting. He explored the form beauty in landscape paintings and organized and chooses subjectively the pictures, instead of staying on the description of nature.

In the 1960s, Wu Guanzhong did not have many oil paintings, but he drew a number of landscape works by wading through the mountains and rivers and surpassing the strange peaks. He has made great breakthroughs in artistic exploration, showing the changeable composition and free and flexible brushwork. The colors are thin and transparent, with the blooming effect of watercolor. The representative ones are the Tibetan series of paintings, such as "The Streets of Lhasa (2)" "Figure 1". The brushwork is simple and light, and the colors are bright, elegant and transparent. The contrast between warm and cold colors is carried out in a large color gamut to emphasize the spatial relationship of the picture. According to the ingenious interweaving of the rhythms of dots, lines and surfaces, he is sensitive to the rhythms of dots, lines and colors, and people can feel the unrestrained and passionate brushstrokes. Its elegant and fresh painting language is in sharp contrast with the prevailing thematic and plot paintings at the time. However, due to the situation in China at that time, his painting style was not promoted.

Judging from the oil paintings in the 1950s and 1960s, Wu Guanzhong's interest in the details of objective objects has been transformed into a pursuit of large areas of color blocks. The description of object details is unified in large color blocks, and he has more choices and generalization about the scenery. Lines play an indispensable role of emphasis in the picture. Without the composition of the scenography, and the composition forms are rich and diverse. He pursues the simplicity and generalization of colors, with a sense of watercolor color blooming and transparency. Also, it weakens the spatial depth of realistic oil painting. Compared with the formulaic and conceptual works of mainstream paintings at that time, Wu Guanzhong's paintings are full of passion, paying great attention to the natural expression of emotions in paintings, and subjective selection of scenes, trying to find corresponding language forms to enhance the overall appeal of paintings.¹

1. Tan Hongmei. Research on Wu Guanzhong's Oil Painting Art [D]. Nanjing University of the Arts. 2015: 65.

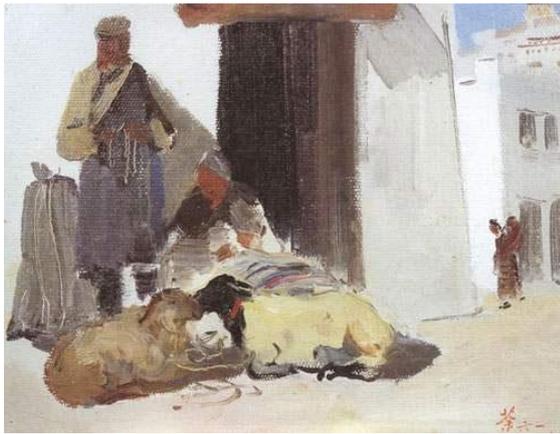


Figure 1 "The streets of Lhasa (2)" by Wu Guanzhong, 28x36cm, 1961.

3.2 The Artistic Characteristics of the 1970s

In the 1970s, Wu Guanzhong ushered in a period of prolific and fruitful oil painting art, rich in creative themes, and new breakthroughs in painting language. The ink brushwork and the movement of black, white and gray colors appeared in the oil paintings. The complex and changeable calligraphic lines and the use of large areas of white space give rise to the "emptiness" of Chinese painting.² For example, a series of works such as "Yangtze River Bridge (Nanjing)", "Northern Scenery" and "Paddy Field" created in 1973 still adopt the high-viewpoint composition form, freely choose the most formal scene organization picture, and purify the relationship between physical structure of the scene and color. He introduced white clouds, smog, river water, snow mountains, etc. into the paintings. Large areas of white and high-brightness grays play the effect of "Leaving Blank Space" in Chinese paintings, and the "peace and quiet" artistic conception of Chinese paintings is integrated into the oil paintings. The most representative work in the 1970s is "Yangtze River in 1974" "Figure 2". A long scroll is similar to Chinese landscape paintings, which is unfolded and appreciated in the form of scroll paintings. It can be said to be a typical example of Wu Guan's integration of Chinese and Western art, showing the maturity of individualized language of art form. In the painting, there is not only the refinement of the formal language of Western modern painting, but also the artistic conception of Chinese painting.

2. Tan Hongmei. Research on Wu Guanzhong's Oil Painting Art [D]. Nanjing University of the Arts. 2015: 30.

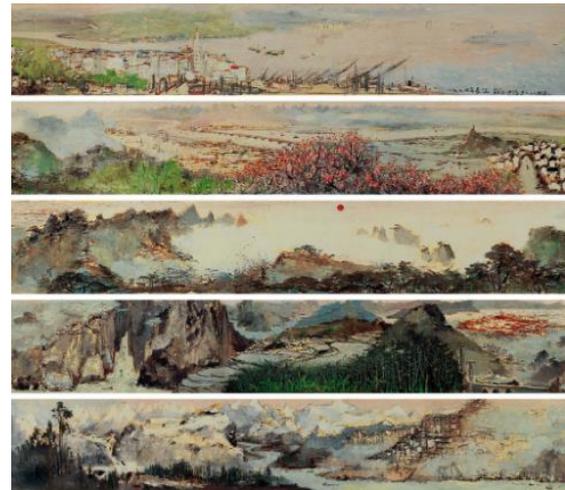


Figure 2 "Yangtze River in 1974" by Wu Guanzhong, 603x19.5cm, oil painting on paper, collected by the Palace Museum.

In 1979, Wu Guanzhong held two solo exhibitions at the National Art Museum of China and Chongqing City. From his works, people can feel his pursuit of formal beauty. Wu Guanzhong emphasized the sense of form in the pictures, and explored the beauty of form in the pictures that tend to be realistic. However, due to historical reasons, his pursuit of form in the 1950s and 1960s could only be limited. Until the 1970s, the political atmosphere was relatively relaxed and free. Since then, his art theory and art practice have been fully developed. But the pursuit of form is not Wu Guanzhong's ultimate goal. Form must serve the artistic conception he wants to convey. As his ink and wash painting matures, the freehand element of ink and wash painting gradually penetrates into oil painting. He even uses oil painting and ink and wash painting to paint works of the same subject and composition, so as to seek the possibility of communication and transplantation between two different painting media.³

Generally speaking, during this period, Wu Guanzhong's oil paintings have become more and simpler in composition and image processing. It seems that he is looking for the most concise and pure expression, and the brush strokes have become more and more freehand. Under the command of the simplified concept, he reduced the space and volume of Western oil paintings. With the heavy and strong expression of the oil paintings, he combined the elegant, transparent and pen-and-ink

3. Tan Hongmei. Research on Wu Guanzhong's Oil Painting Art [D]. Nanjing University of the Arts. 2015: 34.

taste of Chinese paintings, showing the eastern poetry.

3.3 *The Artistic Characteristics of 1980s-1990s*

If it is said that the basic characteristics of Wu Guanzhong's oil painting in the 1970s tended to be realistic, focusing on the portrayal and specific depiction of objects. Then, there have been more freehand brushwork elements since the 1980s. During this period, Wu Guanzhong wandered freely between oil painting and ink and wash painting, expressing his feelings, applying the pen and ink of ink and wash painting to oil painting vividly, and proposing the slogan that painting should pursue the beauty of form. Then, there had been heated controversies about form and content, and the beauty of form.

The 1980s was a mature stage of exploration of the integration of Chinese and Western art. There were the most oil paintings and rich painting subjects. New breakthroughs were made in the artistic language of oil paintings. The style became mature. The oil paintings highlighted the pen and ink interest. And a high degree of unity was achieved in the beauty of form and the beauty of artistic conception. Wu Guanzhong's oil painting art has been concise and generalized in the long-term exploration of Chinese and Western integration, and has more freehand elements. It is an organic combination of the concrete and abstract. He does not seek the true reproduction of real objects, colors, and spaces; he pursues the concise and elegant color of the picture. The brush strokes are more relaxed and free, and the pictures are full of the charm of Chinese painting. For example, the oil painting "People in region of rivers and lakes" in 1985 changed the previous high-point panoramic composition and detailed depiction of spatial relationships "Figure 3". The colors and shapes were more concise. The basic tone of the picture was black and white, which was elegant and quiet, highlighting the freehand brushwork of Chinese painting. The black tiles and white walls are the culmination of his concise colors. The distant mountains are submerged in dreamlike clouds, creating an ethereal and elegant beauty, just like a hearty Chinese ink and wash painting. He did not sacrifice the rich expressive power of oil painting while adopting Chinese ink and wash brushes, showing that the painter has reached a higher level in the expression of oil painting language and Chinese poetic sentiment. The profound knowledge

of Chinese culture and the exquisite western painting sculpting ability allowed Wu Guanzhong to do well in ink and wash painting and oil painting. His painting language became more and more concise and general, and he pursued a high degree of unity between the beauty of form and the beauty of artistic conception, which marked the maturity of his exploration of the integration of Chinese and Western art.



Figure 3 "People in the region of rivers and lakes" by Wu Guanzhong, oil paintings on canvas, 1985.

In the 1990s, he no longer sketched directly from life, but described the nature in his heart. The language of oil painting was more concise and simple, and his realm became clearer.⁴ He paid attention to the form of the picture, but put more emphasis on subjective feelings, expressed his inner feelings, and focused on the creation of artistic conceptions with freehand techniques. In the 1990s, with the completion of the modern transformation of oil painting, the language and expression of oil painting became more free and varied. The objects and colors were concise, and also were summarized to the extreme. On the basis of the freehand brushwork in the 1980s, the paintings had more abstract elements. His subject matter also began to shift from the countryside to the city, and he used large brushes to express the poetry of the city's landscape, with enhanced abstraction and more imagery.

At the beginning of the late 1990s, Wu Guanzhong's works presented a large number of memories of his hometown and childhood, downplaying the concepts of traditional still lifes, figures and landscape paintings, and entering the

4. Tan Hongmei. Research on Wu Guanzhong's Oil Painting Art [D]. Nanjing University of the Arts. 2015: 38-39.

realm of "mind-like scenery". As the sublimation period of Wu Guanzhong's art in the 1990s, it has extremely distinctive characteristics. In his works, people will always feel the charm of traditional Chinese ink and the visual impact of modern western expression methods. He used oil paintings to express the traditional Chinese implication, highlighting the essence of Chinese traditional culture and expanding the expression space of Chinese oil paintings. All in all, in the 1990s, Wu Guanzhong's oil painting art entered a broader field of vision and realm, deeply touched the living conditions and life perceptions of human beings, and insight into the depths of human nature. The symbol or implied meaning in the picture is his life perception after experiencing the vicissitudes of life and seeing the warmth and coldness of the world, and it is his profound experience of nature and life. In Wu Guanzhong's later years, objects and colors are no longer the main purpose of his paintings, but he pays more attention to the expression of inner emotions. The purity of the soul and the simplicity of the paintings are natural.

In summary, the period from 1970s to 1980s was the junction of Wu Guan's integration of Chinese and Western art. The beauty of form and the beauty of artistic conception achieved the best combination. With the maturity of ink and wash painting, freehand feelings have been highlighted in oil paintings. These changes are related to the maturity of his formal language exploration in recent decades, and are also related to the historical background of reform and opening up, making the painter's thinking and practice wider. Since the 1990s, the works are sublimation based on the freehand brushwork of the 1980s. The emotional expression surpasses the pursuit of formal beauty. People can paint whatever they want, and the form "retreats" to the back of the picture. He always reminds himself that his art is rooted in the people and serves the people. In order to achieve the effect of both elegance and common appreciation, the charm presented in the works is the Chinese spirit and national temperament.

Wu Guanzhong insists on using oil paintings to express the life, feelings and spiritual world of his own nation throughout his life. He emphasizes that art must take root in the soil of national life if he wants to obtain themes and inspirations from real life and express his own thoughts and feelings. Wu Guanzhong's abstraction is different from Western abstractionism. His abstraction comes from the refinement and sublimation of real life. Wu Guanzhong paints objects and scenes in real life,

paints objects that can be seen and heard by ordinary people, and pursues the pen and ink taste and artistic conception in Chinese painting. With the introduction of oil paintings, imagery modelling, etc., a unique and individual language will be formed.

4. THE INTEGRATION OF THE PAINTING LANGUAGE OF TRADITIONAL CHINESE INK AND WASH PAINTING AND THE WESTERN MODERN MODELING LANGUAGE

On the basis of Lin Fengmian's view on the integration of Chinese and Western art, Wu Guanzhong has unremittingly explored the different aesthetic concepts of the two artistic languages of Chinese and Western painting, and devoted himself to the study of the deep integration of oil painting and local culture. He not only has a deep foundation in traditional Chinese culture, but also has a strong modern consciousness. He organically combines the artistic conception of traditional Chinese painting with the expression language of modern Western painting art, and pursues the unity of the beauty of form and the beauty of artistic conception. As the source of artistic creation, culture expresses the Chinese charm through the language of oil painting, forming a distinctive artistic characteristic.

4.1 Modelling

Wu Guanzhong's oil painting is the media of the integration of multiple artistic languages. He incorporates Western modern modelling language into the painting language of traditional Chinese ink and wash painting, and blends the painting styles of Eastern and Western art. Wu Guanzhong can move freely between oil painting and ink and wash painting, transplanting between ink and wash painting and western oil painting, integrating the taste of Chinese painting into oil painting, and integrating Western artistic characteristics into ink and wash painting, and creating many shocking works. In his painting practice, he can freely switch between different artistic materials and painting types. His sketches are in the same vein as ink and oil painting, and his works show a strong sense of formal beauty.

4.2 Color

In the use of colors, Wu Guanzhong's works are generally slightly gray and cold in color, giving people a feeling of warmth and coldness. Wu Guanzhong pays attention to color matching and coordination, with suitable shades, and creates a picture atmosphere that is just right. The color of Wu Guanzhong's oil paintings is symbolic, breaking through the color constraints of traditional oil paintings, using colors as chess pieces under his brush, and serving the picture at will. Each color block seems to be plain and ordinary. After his reconciliation and combination, the plain color will be produced. With a shocking aesthetic effect, the screen can highlight the spiritual connotation of the work. For example, from his oil paintings "Catching the Dream", "Landlord's Home", "Lu Xun's Hometown" and so on, people can see this in "Figure 4".



Figure 4 "Lu Xun's Hometown" by Wu Guanzhong, 46x61cm, oil painting on wood, 1977.

4.3 Composition

He has carried out a comprehensive exploration and practice of composition methods and composition styles in his oil painting works, forming his unique composition forms, such as "panoramic" style, "monument" style, "one corner" or "half side" style, "C-shaped" style and many other composition styles. In terms of composition, Wu Guanzhong broke through the traditional thinking pattern. The lines of the picture are scattered and dense, the colors are bold and full, and the use of black and white is unique. The use of black and white makes the picture simplistic, with the charm of oriental art, full of the charm of Chinese painting, and a kind of special beauty of oriental art. The picture layout has a unique aesthetic perspective, giving people an infinite

sense of space. The picture modeling is a fusion of concrete and abstract, with the use of traditional ink and wash painting to create a tranquil and natural mood.

He emphasizes the beauty of the form of the picture. The form serves to create the artistic conception. Different formal languages convey different artistic conceptions. The artistic conception is the ultimate goal he pursues. The artistic conception is contained in the form, and the beauty of the artistic conception is achieved through the pursuit of the beauty of the form, that is, the best unity of the beauty of the form and the artistic conception. In terms of artistic conception creation, Wu Guanzhong is a well-deserved master of Chinese and Western art. He is committed to the integration of Chinese and Western art. He uses Western painting methods to express eastern artistic conception, and integrates Chinese artistic conception into oil paintings. For example, in the picture, the fresh green in early spring is used to create fresh air and infinite vitality; the picture of the village house by the water and the black tile and white wall is used to create a quiet and light artistic conception; and the thin mist and gentle wind are used to create an ethereal and harmonious artistic conception, making the picture produce a lyric poetic appeal.

5. CONCLUSION

Wu Guanzhong devoted his life to the development of the nationalization of oil painting and made outstanding contributions to accelerating the development of the nationalization of oil painting. Wu Guanzhong's oil painting art is based on the concept of integration of Chinese and Western art, and explores the form and content of the picture. Through the summary of the color, the position of the business, and the relationship between the virtual and the reality, the pen and ink of the Chinese painting and the black and white, composition and other language forms are combined with the oil painting language, creating oriental charm through the fusion of formal languages. Completed comprehensive research and practice in composition, color and line is carried out, forming his own unique composition point of view and composition style: colors gradually become simple; lines have reached the extreme degree of free and easy writing. Wu Guanzhong's oil painting art benefited from the freehand spirit of traditional Chinese paintings, sublimated and refined from real life, and combined subjectively

the objects needed for interception, with the artist's personal emotions, thoughts and standpoint and a deep understanding of life.⁵ On the basis of in-depth research on the essence, connotation and thought of Chinese and Western art, Wu Guanzhong found the "junction" of the integration of Chinese and Western art.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

This paper is independently completed by Yong Zhang.

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