



On the Artistic Philosophy of Wang Lyu's Painting Theory and the Aesthetic Value of His Works

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Abstract: During the late Yuan and early Ming periods in China, overall artistic thought and landscape painting concepts continued to be influenced by the Four Masters of the Yuan Dynasty. The artistic philosophy proposed by the renowned Yuan painter Ni Zan — “Seek not to capture outward resemblance, but to find self-amusement” — was widely revered throughout society. Amid this trend, Wang Li — a physician who studied painting in his spare time — first learned from ancient masters of previous dynasties before pursuing his own style. He explored the relationship between “form” and “meaning” in landscape painting and emphasized sketching from real scenes. This approach represented a breakthrough and innovation in the context of his era. Guided by reverence for traditional landscape painting and a passion for art history, this study examines Wang Lyu's cultural context, artistic theories, creative practices, and the influence of his ideas on later generations and their implications for our own landscape painting studies and creation. Employing research methods such as literature review, case analysis, artwork appreciation, and iconography, it explores the creative concepts and insights Wang Lyu offers us. The aim is to deepen our understanding of ancient artistic philosophies, thereby enhancing our painting cultivation and promoting the excellence of traditional culture.

Keywords: Wang Lyu; painting theory; landscape painting; artistic thought

1. Introduction

In ancient Chinese painting circles, emphasis was placed on summarizing painting methods, giving rise to a rich body of painting theory research. In contemporary Chinese society, discourse on artistic spirit and thought is also abundant. In his 2010 monograph *The Spirit of Chinese Art*, Xu Fuguan argued: “The self-awareness of the Chinese artistic spirit is primarily manifested in painting and literature, with painting being the ‘only son’ of Zhuangzi's philosophy.” [1] Objectively analyzed without an adversarial perspective, the ideas contained within this statement are undoubtedly profoundly thought-provoking. One theoretical pillar supporting this assertion is literati painting — a tradition rarely mentioned in the history of world art yet one that long dominated the Chinese painting scene and shaped the trajectory of traditional Chinese painting. The most profound influence on traditional literati artists came from the aesthetic principle of “learning from nature through the heart,” proposed by the art theorist Yao Zui in the context of figure painting. For Wang Lyu, who flourished in the early Ming dynasty, this meant both rigorously adhering to the artistic principles established by his predecessors and infusing tradition with his own interpretations and innovations. Amidst the prevailing court painting style of his era, he creatively articulated the artistic philosophy: “I learn from my heart, my heart learns from my eyes, and the eye follows Mount Hua.” To comprehensively examine how the painter's artistic spirit and philosophy manifested in his creations and what insights they offer us, this discussion will explore the formation of Wang Lyu's artistic philosophy and the spirit of his painting theories across different periods.

2. Wang Lyu and the Formation of His Artistic Philosophy

2.1 Introduction to Wang Lyu and the Transformation of Painting Styles After the Song Dynasty

Born in 1332 in Kunshan County, Jiangsu Province (present-day Kunshan City), Wang Lyu hailed from a family of physicians. Influenced by his family's scholarly traditions, he began studying medicine as a child and later practiced medicine to support himself. Naturally studious and intelligent, he achieved considerable accomplishments in medicine, authoring numerous medical texts. Today, only his *Medical Classics: A Retrospective Collection* survives due to the passage of time. Simultaneously, reflecting the profound importance placed on the imperial examination system in ancient China, traditional literati harbored aspirations for official positions. Thus, alongside his medical practice, Wang Lyu diligently studied Confucian culture, mastering medical theory alongside classical poetry and prose. To many, he appeared merely as a physician with a passing interest in painting. However, records indicate that in his youth, when first drawn to painting, he studied and

copied the landscapes of Southern Song masters like Xia Gui and Ma Yuan. Art critics praised his work: “His brushwork is elegant and vigorous, his compositions lush and dense, embodying the full spirit of a literati artist.” From his early days gathering herbs amidst mountains and forests, he gradually developed a deep fascination with nature’s flora, fauna, and rock formations. Through meticulous study and copying of ancient paintings, combined with his accumulated observations of real landscapes and his own profound inner perceptions, he laid the foundation for his later artistic philosophy and creation of realistic landscape paintings. Throughout the history of Chinese painting, it can be said that “each era produces its own talented artists, each leading the trend for centuries”. Landscape painting originated during the Wei, Jin, and Southern and Northern Dynasties, flourished significantly in the Sui and Tang periods, and reached maturity in the Song and Yuan eras. The earliest conceptualization of landscape painting emerged in Gu Kaizhi’s “Record of Mount Yuntai”. However, according to relevant historical records, the descriptions in his text were idealized concepts designed to frame the story of Zhang Daoling’s final ascension of his seven disciples. It bears no relation to any real mountain; he merely used Mount Yuntai as a backdrop for this narrative. Though still conceptual, this reveals that landscape painting was conceived from its inception as a cultural medium for literati to express their “spiritual energy”. Through further exploration by painters like Zong Bing and Wang Wei, by the Sui Dynasty, Zhan Ziqian’s *Spring Excursion* signaled the maturation of landscape painting beyond the naive style of the Wei-Jin period, where “figures towered over mountains and waters seemed confined.” This evolution continued through the efforts of Tang Dynasty artists like Li Sixun and Li Zhaodao., and the inheritance and innovation by Jing Hao, Guan Tong, Dong Yuan, and Ju Ran during the Five Dynasties period, the blue-green landscape style experienced a period of decline. By the Song Dynasty, artists like Zhao Boju and Wang Ximeng revived the blue-green landscape tradition, while Southern Song masters such as Li Tang, Ma Yuan, and Xia Gui championed an elegant and supremely concise style. During the Yuan Dynasty, the ruling class held political distrust toward the Han Chinese, leading to the exclusion of many Han literati from official careers. Concurrently, the vast territory of the Yuan empire brought together diverse ethnic groups and populations from various regions, which indirectly fostered commercial and cultural prosperity. In the field of painting, this environment encouraged a break from traditional constraints, giving rise to the development and expansion of the free-hand brushwork style, which stood in contrast to the realistic academic painting style of the Song Dynasty. From then on, it increasingly became a vehicle for Chinese literati to express their emotions, playing an irreplaceable role in promoting and preserving the spirit of the scholar-official class within the development of Chinese painting. This was certainly tied to the social context of the time, but this style, emphasizing “meaning” over “form,” undeniably represented progress. By the early Ming Dynasty, when Han Chinese regained political dominance, artistic freedom declined compared to previous eras. The era’s strict centralization stifled scholars, inevitably fostering closed-minded conservatism.

2.2 The Transformation of Landscape Painting Styles and Its Influence on Wang Lyu’s Artistic Philosophy

The early Ming “revived” the Song dynasty painting style, though it had never entirely vanished during the Yuan period — as evidenced by early Yuan artists like Gong Kai and Qian Xuan. Upon entering the Ming, literati painters (bureaucrats or scholars whose primary occupation was not painting) who led the art world into new territories were extremely cautious in their studies or deliberately leaned toward the Northern Song style. The works of Ma Yuan and Xia Gui were regarded as authentic representations of the Southern Song court’s dominance over half the realm. Yet, considering the Southern Song’s feigned poverty and weakness alongside certain painting innovations within its imperial academy, it became evident that artistic achievements would inevitably yield to the “face” demanded by the Ming rulers — that is, political imperatives. Throughout China’s dynastic history, the rise of amateur literati painters likely began in the Yuan Dynasty, and they shared significant connections with professional painters of the time. (Most Yuan painters were not professionals.) Many occupied high positions in the imperial court or came from scholarly families with deep academic traditions. As mentioned earlier, painting served merely as an outlet for their keen observations of the world around them and the emotional responses these observations evoked. Therefore, we cannot view the Yuan literati’s fascination with freehand landscape painting merely as a means to vent frustration over bleak political prospects. In truth, each artist possessed unique strengths. However, constrained by the limitations of their era — where, philosophically speaking, social existence determines social consciousness — painters in an agrarian civilization with underdeveloped market economies could only rely on feudal bureaucrats for patronage. On the other hand, painters who eschewed mainstream appeal and were deemed “out of step with the times” saw their contributions downplayed, even when significant. This led to certain pivotal figures in Chinese painting history receiving undeserved neglect. This phenomenon was particularly evident during the transition from the Yuan to the Ming dynasty, when scholars fiercely debated whether to emulate the Southern Song court tradition’s emphasis on “form” and meticulous refinement or to embrace the Yuan literati’s focus on “spirit” and free-spiritedness. From the above, it is evident that the

practice of copying ancient masters was prevalent in the painting world at the time. When Wang Lyu first began painting, he also held the works of Song and Yuan dynasty painters in the highest regard. The works of Li Tang, Liu Songnian, Ma Yuan, and Xia Gui were all subjects he copied, and his approach to learning was very earnest. He often demanded of himself that he achieve lifelike results. This approach persisted until his time in Shaanxi. Thus, he did not simply reject imitation of the ancients. After absorbing the essence of his predecessors, he developed his own understanding and insights into landscape painting, which ultimately led to his unique artistic philosophy and the creation of his later albums.

3. Artistic Philosophy and Innovation in Wang Lyu's Painting Theories Across Different Periods

3.1 Seeking Medical Treatment in Shaanxi and Grand Tour of Mount Hua

In the early Ming Dynasty, court painters supported by the ruling elite primarily studied the traditions of the Southern Song Imperial Painting Academy. While their works were meticulously crafted and visually splendid, this approach also fostered a stale, antiquated style rooted in rigid imitation of ancient techniques. Second, the high-pressure policies implemented by the founding emperor of the Ming dynasty after his ascension caused some amateur literati painters in the south to retreat into a passive, reclusive state. This cannot be entirely considered a negative development. Among the leading figures of this era, Wang Lyu, who pursued painting as a hobby, did not allow such passive sentiments to permeate his life or creative work.

In the early Ming period, having endured a lifetime of warfare, Wang Lyu was now approaching fifty. Serving as Chief Physician at the residence of Prince Zhu Shuang of Qin in Shaanxi (under the Ming's feudal prince system), he heard of Mount Hua in eastern of Shaanxi, renowned for its precipitous cliffs and uniquely beautiful mountain pines. An ardent lover of painting, he resolved to climb Mount Hua with fellow artists to witness its splendor firsthand. During the ascent, "I carried paper and brushes with me, sketching whenever I encountered a splendid scene." In his later preface, he wrote: "The mountain soared five thousand ren high, rising straight for forty li. As I climbed, I could only gasp for breath, pausing to catch my breath every few steps." After returning from the climb, he spent days and nights in his study refining his ideas. He carefully studied his sketches, drawing on his past experience in copying masterpieces. It took him half a year to complete the work. He produced over forty albums, each featuring uniquely rendered forms: mountains depicted as precipitous, whimsical, or intricate. Some captured the vast, serene valleys of Mount Hua, while others portrayed abrupt, dynamic shifts, as if the rocks were perpetually in motion. These works revealed Mount Hua's myriad marvels — a masterpiece of nature's artistry — layered with precision yet retaining profound poetic spirit. This journey to Mount Hua proved to be a pivotal turning point in his artistic career. There, he gained a deeper understanding of what a painter should strive for: innovation within the framework of tradition, rather than merely relying on copying or studying ancient painting theories. The most beautiful paintings do not reside solely in the exquisite works of past masters, but are found all around us — in a blade of grass, a tree, a river, or even a forest. This requires physical and mental preparation, demanding both the body and the mind to be fully engaged.

3.2 Exploring the relationship between "form" and "artistic conception"

With a clear artistic principle of refusing to compromise his inner convictions for market appeal, he later produced works like the Huashan Album and the Preface to the Huashan Album, which blend painting practice with theoretical exploration. After traversing Mount Hua, he grew increasingly devoted to "learning from nature." This deepened his dissent toward the prevailing Southern literati's adherence to Yuan Dynasty painting traditions. From then on, he steadfastly upheld this perspective in his work, infusing it with fusion and innovation to carve out new artistic horizons. As he expressed in verse: Since youth I've loved painting mountains, For over thirty years I've imitated four or five masters, Yet always found lack of likeness a hindrance. Upon climbing Mount Hua, witnessing its extraordinary beauty, I realized ancient painters didn't rely solely on copying to capture its essence. The true method lies in correcting past approaches, Observing nature's scenery and sketching from life to improve. Though I cannot yet stand shoulder to shoulder with the ancients, I believe learning from nature's creation May free me from the constraints of all schools." [2]

It is evident that for decades before climbing Mount Hua, he had relentlessly pursued the lifelike precision of the ancients. Yet, lacking direct communication with them and unable to grasp their true intent through treatises alone, he failed to achieve genuine artistic advancement. This caused him great distress. It was precisely through the experience of sketching on Mount Hua that he realized why he had stagnated — the rigid pursuit of traditional methods prevented him from breaking free from the masters' conventions and stepping outdoors to truly experience nature's vastness and richness. The "realism" discussed in the poem refers not merely to the faithful depiction of an object's outward appearance, but more crucially to merging with the spirit of nature itself — achieving "both form and spirit." This very topic had been debated in Chinese painting history for nearly two thousand years, with early painters like Gu and Lu Qi already proposing theories (such as the

“Theory of Freeing the Spirit”). It was only through this trip to Mount Hua that he had an epiphany, recognizing the problem within himself. Moreover, among the fifteen travel essays he composed during this ascent, one preface to his paintings states: “While the demands on the form of objects in painting are somewhat less stringent than those on the artistic conception the painter seeks to express, if the conception is lacking, an accurate representation of form is deemed to undermine the painting’s artistic conception. Yet, without form, how can the viewer discern the grand artistic conception the painting aims to convey?”[3]

He recognized that artistic inspiration springs from daily life. To convey genuine emotion in painting, the artist must first render the subject authentically. While artistic conception is essential, without accurate representation of objective reality — that is, without capturing the essence of the subject — how can one create a moving work? In his treatise on painting, he also noted: “To paint an object as it truly is, how can one not recognize its form?” I wholeheartedly agree with this perspective. Of course, in his era, scientific materialist thought had not yet emerged, so his approach likely stemmed from personal insight. Nevertheless, it reflects his unique viewpoint. Without truthfully reflecting the subject, how can one objectively render it on canvas? If one never sees Mount Hua, merely studying painting treatises in a study and admiring the masterpieces of predecessors, how could one possibly create a fine painting of Mount Hua? His creative practice fully demonstrates the importance of sketching from life in the study of landscape painting.

Similarly captivated by painting research, many artists before Wang Lyu had gained fame by proposing unique stylistic ideas. Fan Kuan, one of the Three Masters of the Northern Song Dynasty, studied Li Cheng in his youth. While learning from predecessors provided insights into brush techniques and symbolic language for landscapes, he lacked personal practical experience to develop his own artistic voice. Thus he too began immersing himself in life and nature, painting landscapes from direct observation. Hailing from Tongchuan, Shaanxi, he frequently roamed the foothills of Mount Zhongnan and Mount Taibai in the Qinling Mountains. Often staying in the mountains for months at a time to grasp nature’s true essence, he engaged in deep observation and sketching. He captured the genuine appearance, spirit, and essence of the mountains and rivers. Take his work “Travelers Among Mountains and Streams” as an example. Mountains dominate nearly half the composition, rendered with unadorned sincerity. This truly captures the rugged, solemn, and virile beauty of the Qinling Mountains. In this regard, Wang Lyu’s depiction of Mount Hua similarly demonstrates his respect for and straightforward portrayal of nature. During the Song Dynasty, Emperor Huizong oversaw the compilation of the Xuanhe Catalogue of Paintings, a compendium of ancient paintings and artists. Within it, he articulated his aesthetic philosophy: “The methods of earlier painters essentially involved observing objects close at hand. Rather than immersing oneself in vast archives of ancient texts and outdated paintings, one should venture into nature — ideally guided by one’s own inner voice.” Here, “objects” refer to nature. From the perspective of traditional Chinese painting’s continuity, while Wang Lyu’s artistic achievements may not match Fan Kuan’s, they share a common ground in their profound and clear self-awareness and their rational understanding of painting. Art history critiques of Wang Lyu also emphasize his emphasis on sketching from life in landscape painting. At a deeper level, their ability to articulate such insights clearly stemmed from extensive practical experience that prepared them theoretically. It was a long and arduous journey. Even today, a painter must possess such qualities, prioritizing the refinement of artistic thought over technical mastery, to produce works of genuine substance and depth. For us, who are still in the early stages of learning landscape painting, we should first study the fundamental techniques from the ancients, and only then can we gradually progress further.

4. Reflections on Wang Lyu’s Artistic Philosophy and the Aesthetic Value of His Works

4.1 Interpreting the Artistic Philosophy Reflected in Wang Lyu’s Painting Theory

Wang Lyu once stated in his painting treatise: From the aesthetic experience gained through faithfully reflecting landscape scenery, to creatively interpreting the creative process, and achieving continuous refinement in both technique and artistic sensibility. Regardless of time or place, one must maintain a passion for life and for painting. Basic theories encountered early on should be selectively applied in practice. This approach can serve as a method and pathway for learning landscape painting, hinting to learners that elevating artistic thought is essential for achieving our goals — rather than blindly pursuing the heights reached by predecessors, which only leaves us perpetually looking up to them.

In his creative practice, he thoroughly discerned the root causes of ineffective methods. Much like in the 21st century today, we must critically inherit the theories of our predecessors. In his treatise on painting, Wang Lyu concluded that the path lies between acceptance and rejection, revealing the laws of painting creation. Chinese landscape painting, after drawing from objective reality, is re-forged and recreated. The key to creation lies in making selective extractions from one’s personal

experiences. One must not be confined to rigidly adhering to scroll formats or blindly following ancient methods. Furthermore, observing the natural landscape reveals that mountains, rivers, and vegetation undergo constant change through the ceaseless cycle of the four seasons. Southern mountains, like those depicted in Huang Gongwang's *Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains*, feature gentle rock formations and picturesque scenery; while northern mountains resemble Fan Kuan's "Travelers Among Mountains and Streams," characterized by their massive, expansive, and vast, misty feel. Faced with such diverse natural scenery, applying ancient methods alone is clearly inadequate. Therefore, in summary, later artists like Wang Lyu concluded that one must discard old methods to forge new innovations, striving to explore painting from perspectives untouched by predecessors. In this regard, we must pay special attention to selective learning during our studies. While valuing traditional training, we should also frequently visit exhibitions of sketches from life and creative works. After extensive exposure, we must first elevate our artistic vision — what Professor Cheng Dali of Peking University's Academy of Arts refers to as cultivating a lofty "free and unconstrained style." Simply put: "With concise brushwork and complete form, one grasps the essence of nature." Only then can subsequent creations break new ground, ascending to a higher artistic realm.

As Shi Tao noted in his *Discourses on Painting by the Bitter Melon Monk* and other treatises: "Those who have attained a certain height in artistic creation do not adhere to fixed rules or conventions. This does not mean they disregard discipline or treat art lightly, but rather that after mastering fundamental skills, they create without relying on restrictive conventions, refusing to be bound by rigid rules. The so-called 'rules' may lie precisely in the absence of rules." The pinnacle of unifying method and transformation lies in partially discarding old techniques during creation to incorporate one's own ideas. I once found Shi Tao's critique of those who merely copied the ancients to be utterly refreshing. Yet upon discovering and studying Wang Lyu's preface to the *Huashan Album*, I realized that in his traditional era, composing such a treatise on painting — emphasizing the expression of subjective emotion and the importance of real landscapes — represented a masterful balancing act between engaging with the ancients and embracing nature.

4.2 Analysis of Individual Pages in the *Huashan Album*

Visitors to the Shanghai Museum can view the *Huashan Album*, which preserves numerous pages featuring diverse themes and compositions. If we were to attribute this variety to the artist's new painting style emerging from the collision of his pre-climb artistic concepts with his post-climb experiences, noting his refusal to adhere to established compositional formulas and types, he would likely respond that he was merely painting the *Huashan* he saw. Yet, the album is filled with distorted, bizarrely contorted boulders. One might well ask: Did the actual landscape truly look like this?

In one album leaf, such rocks dominate nearly the entire composition, leaving only narrow gorges at the edges where a traveler can be seen climbing straight up the mountain path. (Figure 1) Wang Lyu was conveying the towering, precipitous, and perilous impression *Mount Hua* left upon her; The lines are weighty, tapering at the ends and broadening at the turns. It is precisely these intertwining folds, combined with sparse brushstrokes and faint ink washes at the base and sides of the mountains, that form the appearance of the rocks and their pitted surfaces. Pine trees or shrubs grow in the crevices of large rocks or atop large boulders and ridges. Presenting such a colossal cliff face comprehensively to the viewer might evoke Fan Kuan's Northern Song paintings, yet at this juncture, Wang Lyu largely stands apart from these masters. For instance, while both he and Guo Xi seem to imbue landscapes with a transcendent inner vitality, Wang differs by deemphasizing geological effects in his mountain depictions, resulting in a distinct vitality from Guo Xi's work. Song dynasty landscape painting never displayed such bold lines — perhaps owing to Yuan painting? Yet even Yuan painting failed to violate the golden rules of naturalism with such freedom.



Figure 1. Wang Lyu *Huashan Album* one of them 34.7×50.5cm

Writing this, I now understand why art history has neglected detailed study of this pivotal figure at the turning point of landscape painting. Yet I must say: what our contemporary society lacks is precisely this spirit of innovation that separates truth from falsehood. While foundational skills are crucial, merely replicating the masters' techniques on paper would be regression. Didn't Wang Lyu's artistic philosophies — such as “My teacher is my heart, my heart is my eye, my eye is Mount Hua,” “The law resides in Mount Hua,” and “Shaping heaven with ingenuity” — already outline the path of learning? Refine brushwork, layering, and form through sketching from life, then integrate observation with creation. It is widely acknowledged that many accomplished painters find inspiration and breakthroughs through sketching nature. They gradually develop their own artistic language and expression, then build their creative systems by integrating theory with practice, ultimately forging distinctive artistic expression. In artistic creation, stagnation without innovation signifies loss of vitality. Such work will inevitably be discarded by rapidly evolving artistic trends, and even the most skilled techniques will appear overly formulaic. Therefore, once foundational skills are established, artists must not only appropriately draw from the painting theories and techniques of predecessors but also immerse themselves in nature to observe it. When discussing how to approach landscape painting, the Northern Song Dynasty painter Guo Xi stated: “When observing the rivers and valleys of real landscapes, view them from afar to grasp their momentum, and examine them up close to capture their essence.”[5] Momentum refers to the topography, while essence denotes the inherent characteristics. This underscores the importance of observing both the grand sweep and the minute details.

5. Conclusion

Wang Lyu studied under Ma and Xia, inheriting their ink techniques and aesthetic philosophies without being constrained by them. After turning fifty, he realized his earlier paintings were merely “inherited from scrolls.” Undeterred, he continued his studies tirelessly, ultimately producing profoundly thought-provoking treatises on painting and exquisite, yet grandly composed albums. He emphasized the importance of personal insight and the power of nature, urging careful observation of the ever-changing landscapes. Though his ideas may be overshadowed by the brilliance of other masters, the principles he articulates remain profoundly relevant. Especially as traditional Chinese painting evolves today, it is essential to build upon the wisdom of predecessors while breaking free from formulaic conventions and embracing bold innovation. For instance, while studying theoretical knowledge, one must consciously cultivate the ability to observe nature with fresh eyes and understand every blade of grass, every tree, and every stone from diverse perspectives. Those engaged in artistic pursuits should pay attention to the minutiae around them, discovering extraordinary landscapes within the ordinary world. This not only serves as an effective method to break free from the formulaic and habitual patterns of past learning but also greatly benefits the enhancement of personal cultural cultivation and, consequently, the elevation of the cultural atmosphere of society as a whole.

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