Region - Educational Research and Reviews, 2026, Volume 8, Issue 7
DOI: 10.32629/rerr.v8i7.5627
ISSN Online: 2661-4634
ISSN Print: 2661-4626

Research on the creative language of watercolor painting from the perspective of regional culture

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Abstract: The involvement of regional culture in watercolor creation is usually understood as the localization of themes and the representation of local scenery. This understanding confines regional characteristics to the surface of the image, failing to touch upon the internal mechanism of language generation. The central argument of this article is: The significance of regional culture for watercolor painting lies not in the supplying themes, but in the shaping of grammar; it embeds itself in the medium system through three ways: material experience, visual convention, and spiritual temperament. Through three transformations: material translation, grammatical encoding, and spiritual elevation, it condenses into a recognizable language paradigm. The establishment of regional characteristics does not depend on what is depicted, but on the strength and self-consistency of the mutual restraint between the medium's autonomy and local experience.

Keywords: regional culture; watercolor painting; creative language; water-based medium; visual grammar; locality

1 Introduction

Since watercolor paintings entered the Chinese painting scene, they have long been identified by their "Western painting" medium identity, and discussions on their language have mostly focused on aspects such as water control, layering and shading, and the compatibility of paper texture . When local culture is incorporated into the creative scope, the common handling method is to replace the original themes with local landscapes, giving the picture a geographical identifier. However, the viewing method, schematic order, and expression structure remain largely unchanged. This gives rise to a theoretical problem: If local culture merely serves as the source of image content, it only has an external thematic connection with the watercolor language, and the regional nature will remain as superficial symbols that can be replaced.

This article attempts to answer the following question: How can regional culture be transformed from the depicted object into a constitutive condition of language? The central argument is: The languageization of regional culture is a structural process of gradual transformation, which first precipitates as the subjective material operation experience of the subject, then encodes as visual grammar, and finally ascends to spiritual grammar; the regional character of watercolor paintings is generated from the degree of completion and internal consistency of this transformation, rather than from the geographical attribution of the theme.

2 Clarification of concepts and shift in theoretical perspective

Regional culture here is not a collection of local landscapes or folk symbols; rather, it is a meaning system formed through the long-term coupling of geographical conditions, production rhythms, life rituals, and aesthetic conventions. Its efficacy manifests as a sense of place that can be perceived but is difficult to articulate. The creative language is not equivalent to style: style is the recognizable appearance of language presented externally, while language is a hierarchical

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system composed of medium materials, procedural techniques, schematic structures, color systems, and connotative directions. Therefore, for regional culture to enter language, it must go through three levels: the material level, which is the operational experience formed by water, paper, and color under specific climatic and material conditions; the grammatical level, which is the organizational rules of composition, color, and brushstrokes; and the spiritual level, which is the atmosphere and style formed by local experiences [1].

Existing theories provide a starting point for this proposition, while revealing their limitations. Taine explained the generation of art through three elements: race, environment, and epoch. His insight lies in confirming that art is constrained by external conditions, but his limitation is in regarding art as a one-way product of the environment, neglecting the mediating role of the subject's schema. Gombrich's discussion on schema and correction indicates that representation is never passive recording; perception is always organized and continuously corrected through pre-existing schemas. This judgment enables a re-description of the way regional culture functions: regional experience does not directly map onto the picture; it must first be transformed into a schema that the subject can operate with, before it can acquire the realness within pictorial language.

3 Translating material properties: internalization of regional experience in water-based mediums

The essence of watercolor language lies in its water-based nature. Water acts as both a diluent and a medium for transportation and separation; paper serves as both a carrier and a base for adsorption and infiltration; colors are deposited in a transparent layering manner, and the sedimentation and re-suspension of particles constitute the breathing sensation of the picture. The flow rate of water, the evaporation rate, the weight and texture of the paper, and the dispersibility of the pigments jointly determine the boundary form and the degree of randomness of the brushstrokes. These material conditions are not neutral technical prerequisites; they are repeatedly calibrated in the specific regional climate, water quality, and material supply, gradually internalized as the creator's sense and judgment thresholds.

In this sense, regionalism is not so much a visual theme as an operational experience. Humidity changes the radius of water color diffusion and the drying rhythm; temperature affects the fluidity of the pigments; the hardness of the water quality influences the tendency of dispersion and coagulation. Long-term practice enables the subject to form precise estimations of moisture content, brush speed, white-reserving timing, and scrubbing force. This estimation is retained in the form of bodily memory and constitutes the deepest and most difficult-to-transplant root of the native watercolor language. Even if foreign creators master the same technical procedures, the dry-wet critical points in their paintings often deviate, because the experiential knowledge of material properties cannot be transferred along with the schema.

The key to material property translation lies in the control of randomness. Allowing water marks to remain ensures the water-based nature but tends to slide towards uncontrollable chance; using opaque thick application to layer and cover is equivalent to completing the grammar of oil painting with watercolor tools, and the medium subsequently collapses. Mature translation often establishes a rhythm between controllable and uncontrollable: retaining the vitality of infiltration with the dominance of water, defining the boundaries of form with the intervention of the brush, and maintaining the circulation of qi with the restraint of blank space. Zong Baihua's discussion of the interplay of emptiness and fullness and the participation of blankness in the formation of artistic conception can provide an aesthetic foundation for watercolor reserves. Blankness is not incompleteness but a meaningful gap summoned onto the stage by formal order [2].

4 Grammar encoding: order of schema, color and brushstroke

Visual grammar serves as the intermediary for the transformation of physical experiences into social expressions. At the composition level, the depth order of perspective focus and the scattered experience of wandering observation are often

juxtaposed: the former provides the credibility of space, while the latter offers the free extension of the line of sight. The ratio between these two determines whether the picture "looks deep into the distance" or "moves among them". Thus, the regional visual conventions enter into the distribution of proportions, the directing of the line of sight, and the handling of the fullness and emptiness of boundaries. Composition is no longer the application of universal rules but the embodiment of local viewing methods.

The regionality of color lies not in the collection of hues, but in the organizing principle of color relationships. This manifests as the width of luminance gradation differences, the restraint or latitude of saturation ranges, and the direction of colour-temperature shift: an environment with humidity and fog tends to compress luminance contrast and expand the gray range of the midtones, giving the picture a sense of moist air; an environment with intense light and transparent air tends to widen the luminance span and increase the purity contrast, exchanging intensity for clarity. The same hue has different meanings in different relationships, so the essence of regional color is a replicable relationship structure, not a reusable color mixing formula.

At the brushstroke level, the scriptuality of composition constitutes the key interface for the connection between watercolor and the local aesthetic tradition. The temporal, force variation and feathering effect of calligraphic brushstrokes can be translated into the brushstroke direction, superimposition layers and edge treatment of watercolor, allowing the brushstroke to simultaneously carry the shaping of form and the traces of emotion. Arnheim points out that direction, inclination and imbalance will generate visual forces with directionality; accordingly, the direction and convergence of brushstrokes are not just texture issues, but also the generation mechanism of pictorial movement. When the rhythm of brushstrokes conforms to the rhythm of regional life, the visual grammar rises from technique to expression.

The validity of visual grammatical encoding can be assessed by three criteria: recognizability, that is, whether others can discern the regional character from the formal order; consistency, that is, whether all elements follow the same order rather than cancel each other out; and generativity, that is, whether this grammar can generate new works rather than merely replicating existing motifs. All three conditions must be met for regionality to become a language ability; any deficiency will reduce regionality to decoration or a label.

5 Spiritual grammar: the transcendence from object to atmosphere

Spiritual grammar is at the highest level of language. It is no longer the visible form elements but the overall atmosphere after the form has been condensed. The spiritual content of regional culture is manifested as collective memory, life rhythm and value orientation, and when it is reflected in the picture, it appears as style, mood and atmosphere. The mood is not an additional literary explanation, nor is it an inherent attribute of the subject matter. It is the atmosphere that is precipitated in the viewer's perception from the form order; the spirit is derived from the coherence of brushstrokes, water and colors over time, and is the precipitate of consistent formal functioning within the visual field.

The position of the lyrical subject is thus redefined. The creator should be an experienced local person, rather than a traveler with an external perspective; the grammar of the former is shaped by the rhythm of life, while the grammar of the latter is dominated by the established schema. This difference ultimately manifests itself in whether the painting carries a body temperature. When local scenery is approached from a curious perspective, even if the depiction is accurate, the atmosphere remains distant, for the viewing relationship itself has not been reshaped by local experience.

Spiritual grammar can be verified by its irreplatability: when a given schema is transplanted wholesale to another region, the atmosphere of the picture disintegrates not only due to the distortion of the subject matter, but also because the grammar fails to adapt. This indicates that the spiritual layer has truly been embedded in the language structure. Conversely, if the grammar operates normally after replacing the motif, the so-called regionalism is just a detachable skin [3].

6 Geographical self-discipline boundaries and evaluation criteria

Regional expression has two problematic manifestations. The first is the diagrammatization of symbol collage, where architectural outlines, clothing patterns, or object shapes replace grammatical construction, making the work an illustration of regional knowledge; the second is the determinism of subject matter, where geographical locality serves as the basis for language creation, on the assumption that depicting local scenery inherently endows the work with local spirit. The common flaw of both is skipping the transformation process and directly compressing the meaning system of regional culture into recognizable image markers.

In contrast, media self-discipline constitutes an unbreakable bottom line for regional expression. The language boundary of watercolor is defined by wateriness, transparency, and the paper base on which it is carried; once the transparent layers are eliminated by covering materials, even if the regional connotation is fully expressed, it no longer belongs to the language category of watercolor. Regionalism cannot provide an exemption for the crossing of technique boundaries in the expression; the loss of the basis of the medium will cause all cultural expressions to lose their foothold.

On a deeper level, locality is a two-way construction: locality shapes the perception threshold of language, and language, in turn, reshapes the visual cognition of locality. The image of a repeatedly depicted place will be grammaticalized in public perception and become a synonym for a certain system of patterns. Therefore, every language choice made by the creative subject for the locality is simultaneously a cultural interpretation.

Based on this, three evaluation criteria can be proposed: media consciousness, that is, whether the language is faithful to the material basis of the water-based medium; grammatical consistency, that is, whether the formal elements support each other within the same order; spiritual depth, that is, whether the atmosphere of the picture is formed by the long-term accumulation of local experience. When these three are out of balance, regionalism degenerates from a language fact to a stylistic rhetoric.

7 Conclusion

The research on the creative language of watercolor paintings from the perspective of regional culture essentially shifts the focus from the "what to paint" issue to the "how to paint" and "why paint in this way" issues in terms of grammar. Regional culture enters the language system through three aspects: material experience, visual grammar, and spiritual grammar. The quality of this transformation determines whether regional characteristics are the fundamental essence of the language or merely superficial markers that can be replaced. For the creator, the region is not a material repository but rather a form of expression that needs to be translated; for criticism, the criterion for judging regional watercolor paintings does not lie in the geographical attribution of the subject matter, but in the unity of media consciousness, grammatical consistency, and spiritual depth. Only by completing this transformation can regional culture truly become the language of watercolor paintings rather than merely a decoration.

Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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