

Bridging Heritage and Modernity: A Comparative Study of Traditional Chinese and Western Flower-and-Bird Paintings

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ABSTRACT

The research paper investigates the minute intricacies of the correlation between cultural philosophies and aesthetic traditions by conducting a comparative analysis of the flower-and-bird motifs between traditional Chinese and Western paintings. The research uses the theory of Erwin Panofsky's Iconography and Iconology framework to examine the painting techniques which include brushstrokes, colour, and composition that identify the way these elements reflect the broader cultural attitude towards nature. Chinese paintings, especially the ones relating to the Chang'an School are known to be rooted in the Daoist and Confucian philosophies. This emphasises harmony, interconnectedness, and balance. On the contrary, Western artworks of the same motif by artists such as Vincent van Gogh and Claude Monet focus on emotional depth through individual perspective and resonance. The paper conducts qualitative research through the incorporation of primary research data from the various artworks from both Chinese and Western artists as well as secondary data from existing academic literature which helped to analyse the symbolic and visual details. The primary findings of the research show that Chinese art is more focused on universal moral philosophies that use symbolic motifs whereas the Western approach prioritises personal expression and highlights the transience of natural beauty. The paper concludes with a final recommendation for future research into the influence of globalisation and digital technology on the traditional artistic forms and techniques which foster hybrid styles and create connectivity between the East and the West.

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Contribution/Originality: This study contributes to the existing literature by analyzing Chinese and Western flower-and-bird paintings using Panofsky's Iconology framework. This study is one of very few studies investigating cultural philosophies

through art symbolism. The paper's primary contribution is documenting how Confucian-Daoist ideologies contrast with Western individualism, highlighting globalisation's role in hybrid styles.

1. Introduction

Flower-and-bird paintings play a very important role in both Chinese and Western art traditions, each with its unique nature-related connotation. According to [Libin et al. \(2024\)](#), such paintings have been a mainstay in China since the Tang dynasty, signifying philosophical concepts concerning contentment, dimension and oneness of humanity. These are not merely photographs of nature; they represent human principles and emotions. Song dynasty artists, such as Huang Quan and Xu Xi further developed the genre by utilising specific realism to provide detailed representation matching rich choice of colours along with symbolic factors such as peonies for prosperity or cranes for long life, which meant additional implied meaning ([Libin et al., 2024](#)). Chinese artists inherit the world and Western art has very distinct explanations. In the West, still-life paintings including flower-and-bird topics were established during the Renaissance and further developed in the Baroque with an emphasis on beauty, aesthetics as well as expression of transience nature ([Cohen, 2014](#)). This focus on nature as a reflection of deeper themes set the stage for later movements that aimed to move beyond mere representation. Nature motifs were useful both as subjects and media for exploring light, colour, and emotional expression ([Kuang et al., 2023](#)), a technique used by artists including Claude Monet and Vincent van Gogh. For the sake of convenience, and also because both art forms are directly tied to key symbolic and cultural issues, especially for flower-and-bird painting, it is appropriate that this paper focuses on those two aspects.

In painting flowers and birds, both Chinese and Western styles show cultural differences in a comparative study. This is an ancient philosophical and spiritual heritage in China, which has a deep historical root from Confucianism to Taoism: nature was regarded as a symbolic image of ethics and the connection between humanity and nature ([Xiaowei, 2018](#)). The difference highlights the significance of each culture, with Chinese art accentuating unity and commonality, contrasting with Western expressive individualism. Its representation distribution changed similarly to the Impressionist movement of Western art, where artists focused on personal perception and transient light, while Chinese painters leaned towards balance and order ([Kuang et al., 2023](#)). Van Gogh and Monet, for instance, introduced emotions into their work, emphasising expression. These cultural differences affirm the importance of understanding distinct perspectives of each tradition as they relate to nature. Against this background, the present study aims to investigate the differences in traditional image elements and composition methods featured in Chinese and Western flower-and-bird paintings, as well as how these variations manifest each culture's attitude toward nature. The study emphasises the art of the Chang'an School and Shi Lu, Kang Shiyao, and Jiang Wenzhan, as well as Monet, and van Gogh. As it explores a similar theme with regard to nature paintings amongst different cultures, this study seeks out some of the hidden philosophical and symbolic content embedded within these artworks.

1.1. Research Objective

To investigate how colour, brushstroke techniques, and composition in the Chang'an

School differ from those used in Monet's and van Gogh's works, reflecting each culture's view of nature.

1.2. Research Question:

How do the artistic techniques in Chang'an School paintings contrast with those in Monet's and van Gogh's, and what do these differences reveal about each culture's relationship with nature?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Overview of Traditional Chinese Flower-and-Bird Paintings

Traditional Chinese flower-and-bird painting itself is full of traditional cultural implications, representing the closeness between man and nature or symbolising balance. Using natural elements as a metaphor for qualities and recapitulating the wheel of life, strongly rooted in Confucian philosophies and Daoist traditions, is what these inspiring artworks are about. One of the schools that helped birth this genre was the Chang'an School, which grew and evolved in the 20th century as China faced wider social changes, starting from the Cultural Revolution (Hang, 2017). As a result, many artists from that time- Shi Lu, Kang Shiyao, and Jiang Wenzhan, combined old techniques with new themes. Their designs are both traditional and contemporary, allowing their work to combine the past with modern times (Du, 2021). Unlike the conservative colour symbolism of traditional China, harsh and dynamic colours with any kind of brush play were used to underline energy and emotion. This radical form facilitated artists to approach themes from nature, revolution, and societal changes with a brisk vitality in Chinese art (Shaojun, 2023). Alongside updating the palette, this evolution in aesthetics linked the artworks with contemporary political and cultural narratives, making them culturally relevant to a rapidly changing society. Traditional flower-and-bird paintings were quite conservative in their use of colour, but the Chang'an School introduced vibrant colours while maintaining their philosophical depth (Xue & Misdih, 2024). This fusion of the ancient and modern was more than a style statement- it mirrored the transformation taking place in Chinese culture.

2.2. Western Flower-and-Bird Paintings

During the 19th century, depictions of flowers as well as birds became major themes of Western art commune. Such paintings, with the rise of Impressionism and later the Post-Impressionist movement now tended to focus on light, colour and individual perception rather than the traditional symbolic or religious meanings which transcended in these works (Li, 2024). Artists including Claude Monet and Vincent van Gogh helped to create a new look where images show not solely nature but their experience of it, making them experts in using colours. In his flower paintings and bird series, particularly the famous *Water Lilies*, Monet used a daintier brushwork along with vibrant colour to explore transient light effects as well as atmosphere hoping that nature could be not only referential but also sensational (Li, 2024). In doing so, Monet not only represented the external landscape in precise detail but also its changing moods and transient beauty that encompass light as well as seasons. Again, van Gogh also showed vivid and dynamic colours as exemplified by his *Sunflowers*, combined these with intense psychological experiences—using nature as a direct expression of emotion (Liu, 2024). Due to these innovations, these paintings transcended mere representation and explored the

connection between perception, emotion, and nature's fleeting beauty. For this purpose, they marked a marked departure from flower-and-bird painting traditions.

2.3. Symbolism and Representation in Chinese and Western Art

Identical to the Chinese and even Western faculty of artwork, nature holds symbolic worth but cultural patterns are largely diverging. It is the symbolism that reigns supreme in Chinese art, and sitting inside this conundrum of the flower-and-bird genre. Flowers and birds are often used to symbolise virtues, the stages of life, and cosmic harmony. The peony represents prosperity and wealth, whilst the cranes represent longevity as well as wisdom (Qingqing et al., 2024). As mentioned above, traditional Chinese artists influenced profoundly by Confucian and Daoist ideologies have employed natural splendours to emphasise philosophical concepts; in particular the unity of humanity with nature. In these works, nature is symbolised not only to please the eye with an aesthetic value but also to allow moralistic lessons that reflect society's values and behaviour. Western Art from the 19th century, by contrast to such symbolic interpretations of nature in the East, western art tended relatively away from them toward works that conveyed feelings or optical perceptions. Impressionism, led by artists such as the iconic Claude Monet, focused on transitory moments in time, using flowers and birds to express light, atmosphere, and colour (Opanasiuk et al., 2021). Even though symbolism was central to Chinese art, Western artists viewed nature through the lens of personal experience. The natural world was no longer a vehicle for moral or philosophical reflection but an arena for personal expression, emotion, and experimentation with form.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Approach

Adopting a case study method and adopting the principles of comparative research, this paper compares the visual symbols in traditional Chinese flower-and-bird painting with Western classical representations. The initiative highlights the differences of both cultures, as seen through their artistic traditions which chiefly reside in colour-vibration contrast and harmony, brushwork, composition, and the use of light and shade differentials. Interpretation of the cultural and artistic values situated within these artworks is guided by a qualitative methodology. A visual analysis of these elements and the broader cultural or philosophical meanings that they depict are examined in this study. This study is focused on the contrast of colour, brushwork techniques, composition methods, and light-shadow relationships in Chinese flower-and-bird paintings with their counterparts in Western ones. The thematic reading which follows helps in examining common tropes in both perspectives of paintings and situates them within their cultural and philosophical contexts. Through these comparisons, the paper investigates how nature as a totality of artistic expression was comprehended and communicated within both Chinese and Western cultures.

3.2. Data Collection

The main content of the dataset is a series of valuable works from the Chang'an School, including those by Jiang Wenzhan, Shi Lu, Kang Shiyao, and some Western artists including Monet and Vincent van Gogh. These pieces are taken from online museum archives and exhibits.

The secondary data mainly refers to Chinese and Western flower-and-bird painting books, including academic reading materials on the subject or criticism, and historical archives. These sources provide a structure with which to analyse the symbolic meanings in both traditions.

3.3. Analytical Framework

The study is based on [Panofsky \(1962\)](#) Iconography and Iconology Theory, which puts forth a comprehensive, and multi-layered approach to analysing artworks by investigating both their visual and symbolic aspects. The first layer, Pre-iconographic Description, has a goal to identify the formal characteristics of paintings only, including colour, composition, or types of brush ([Wahidiyat & Carrollina, 2023](#)). This stage is about surface interpretation, giving the basis for deeper meanings. Iconographic Analysis- the second layer, carries the surface details a bit further into identifying the elements present in works as motifs, and those we adopt for a comprehensive study to understand such symbols through their conventional or symbolic meanings, which they share culturally, socially, or philosophically within respective traditions ([Wahidiyat & Carrollina, 2023](#)). This theory is highly relevant to the study, as it elaborates a comparison of how nature-specifically traditional Chinese and Western flower-and-bird paintings are presented not merely as aesthetic content but also as cultural symbols reflecting each society's values, worldviews, and philosophies. The third layer, Iconological Interpretation, delves into deeper symbolic or allegorical readings, interpreting how these motifs disclose the philosophical worldviews underlying them ([Elsner & Lorenz, 2012](#)). By applying this multi-layered approach, the study aims to expose and elaborate on the cultural meanings encoded in Chinese and Western flower-and-bird paintings, offering a further understanding of how each tradition represents nature.

4. Findings

4.1. Use of Colour

In this section, there is a comparison of the use of colour in the works of Vincent van Gogh, Claude Monet, and Traditional Chinese Flower-and-Bird Paintings. The focus is particularly on paintings of the Chang'an School. The comparison highlights the differences in how these traditions approach colour by emphasising philosophical symbolism in Chinese art versus the emotional and experiential use of colour in Western art (Refer to [Table 1](#)).

Table 1: Comparative Analysis of Colour Usage

Aspect	Vincent van Gogh	Claude Monet	Traditional Chinese Flower-and-Bird Paintings (Chang'an School)
Colour Purpose	Emotional expression	Capture light and atmosphere	Symbolism, cultural connotations
Example	Sunflowers: vibrant yellows to convey life and energy (Gombrich & Woodfield, 2021)	Impression, Sunrise: orange and blue hues to evoke the mood of a harbour at dawn (Morley, 2020)	Use of red for auspiciousness, blue for peace (Ma & Misni, 2024)

Technique	Loose brushstrokes, vivid colour contrasts	Method of broken colour, dynamic colour contrasts	Balanced use of traditional colours, and symbolic meanings (Feng et al., 2017)
Philosophy	Depict emotions and movement	Capture transient light and fleeting moments	Reflect harmony, balance, and cultural symbolism
Effect	Evokes emotional intensity and psychological states	Creates luminosity and energy, emphasises the experience of light	Conveys deeper philosophical meanings through colour (Liang, 2022)

The use of colour, integral to Van Gogh, was highly emotional and expressive. Van Gogh (Refer to [Image 1](#)) often used bright, bold colours with loose brushstrokes to express his inner emotions and the energy of his subjects, as seen in *Sunflowers*, where he used vibrant yellows and deep browns to portray the vitality of the flowers (Gombrich & Woodfield, 2021). His colour choices were not about realistic depictions of nature but were meant to evoke emotion. His distinctive palette and brushwork gave his paintings an intensity that reflected his psychological state.

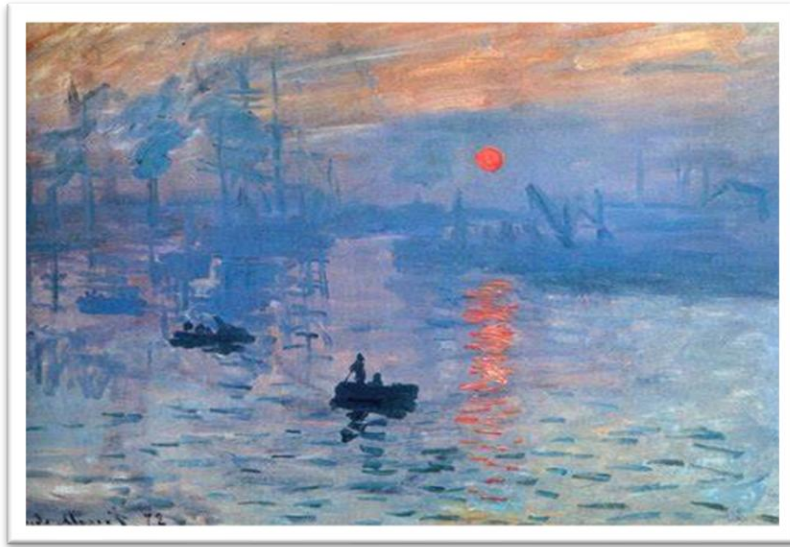
Image 1: Sunflowers, 1889 by Vincent van Gogh



Source: Van Gogh Museum (Van Gogh, 1889)

The Impressionism of colour Monet introduced depended on the effects of light and atmosphere. He relentlessly worked in contrasting colours to give his paintings a shine and charge. Monet (Refer to [Image 2](#)), as an example, uses oranges and blues in *Impression: Sunrise*; he puts colours on a piece because of how the colour makes one feel like being at dawn by the harbour, capturing a sense of light rather than creating precise representation in his version of what happened there (Morley, 2020). Monet used parts of the Impressionist style but did it in this unblended version where he applied thin strokes of pure colour beside one another to evoke a vibrant palette and an impressionistic sense of light and movement (Scott, 2021). This was very different from Chinese painting, where colour as symbolism had nothing to do with capturing transient light effects.

Image 2: *Impression, Sunrise* (1872) by Claude Monet



Source: [du Plessis \(2022\)](#)

In contrast to the emotional and light-focused use of colour in van Gogh's and Monet's works, Traditional Chinese Flower-and-Bird Paintings applied colour with more restraint and symbolism. The Chang'an School, for example, often adhered to the Traditional Chinese Five-Colour Scheme, where red symbolised auspiciousness and blue peace ([Feng et al., 2017](#)). Kang Shiyao, a Chang'an School artist, combined Chinese ink with colour pigments to balance monochrome and vibrant hues (Refer to [Image 3](#)), creating emotional depth while maintaining tranquillity ([Liang, 2022](#)).

Image 3: Autumn Chrysanthemum, 1983 by Kang Shiyao



Source: Mutual Art ([Shiyao, 1983](#))

Colour here embodied philosophical and cultural symbolism, representing harmony in nature rather than fleeting visuals. This comparison shows that while van Gogh and Monet used colour to express emotion and light, Chinese artists used it as a symbolic language tied to traditional values.

4.2. Brushstroke Expression

In this section, the differences in brushstroke techniques between Vincent van Gogh, Claude Monet, and Traditional Chinese Flower-and-Bird Paintings of the Chang'an School are explored. The emphasis of the comparison is on how brushstrokes reflect the emotional, aesthetic, and philosophical underpinnings of each tradition (Refer to [Table 2](#)).

Table 2: Comparative Analysis of Brushstroke Expression

Aspect	Vincent van Gogh	Claude Monet	Traditional Chinese Flower-and-Bird Paintings (Chang'an School)
Brushstroke Style Example	Energetic, dynamic, heavy impasto <i>The Starry Night</i> : Thick, swirling brushstrokes conveying emotional intensity (Zelazko, 2025)	Loose, free, short strokes <i>Water Lilies</i> : Free and loose strokes to convey movement and light (Seitz, 2024 ; Kleiner, 2017)	Precise, refined, controlled brushstrokes <i>Peonies and Sparrows</i> : Fine, detailed strokes capturing nature with delicacy (Lizun et al., 2022)
Purpose	Express emotional intensity, movement, and texture	Capture the sensory experience of light and movement	Convey harmony, balance, and intricate details of nature (Qi, 2019)
Technique	Heavy impasto, thick strokes, high texture	Short, inconsistent strokes, the viewer blends forms	Fine brush technique, deliberate control, and symbolic balance (Feng et al., 2017)
Philosophical Context	Express personal emotions and psychological states	Capture fleeting moments of natural light and atmosphere	Reflect philosophical harmony and spiritual balance in nature (Lizun et al., 2022)

Characterised by the vigour and dynamism of his brushstrokes, van Gogh frequently utilised impasto – a technique in which thick layers of paint are applied to a canvas providing it with texture and vitality ([White Clouds, n.d.](#)). These expressive brushstrokes conveyed his feelings and expressed the disturbances in his mind as he went through some of history's greatest mental pains, and torments that are most well realised in paintings such as *The Starry Night* or *Wheatfield with Crows* ([Zelazko, 2025](#)). The carved brushstrokes in these works convey physical and emotional heft, emanating the artist's perspective on living ([Image 4](#)).

Monet used very free and uncontrolled brushstroke painting, giving the viewer an impressionistic perception. He tried to capture a feeling of the immediate past with rapid, erratic strokes that encouraged viewers to mix colours and shapes themselves. By doing so, [Seitz \(2024\)](#) draws a connection between this 'vibrating rhythm' of

brushstrokes in his works such as *The Water Lilies*, and something that resonates with our sensory perception of the natural world. Monet's strokes kept changing, instead of giving precision, each stroke was a movement with light to let the observer experience more of what Monet is presenting (Kleiner, 2017). This new way of working enabled Monet to depart from conventional practices and had a defining impact on the direction that modern art would take.

Image 4: *The Starry Night* by Van Gogh



Source: [Zelazko \(2025\)](#)

On the contrary, the Chang'an School used fine and clean brushstrokes that reflected their philosophical belief in seeking balance, harmony, and orderliness through nature. Using the fine brush technique, artists like Kang Shiyao captured every detail of flora and fauna in *Peonies and Sparrows* with meticulous attention (Lizun et al., 2022). Shi Lu's brushwork was similarly vigorous but controlled, influenced by Western Expressionism while infused with a sense of Chinese tradition (Qi, 2019). This blend of Eastern and Western methodologies let Shi Lu convey some dazzling yet adjusted visual appeal, both socially rooted against present-day aesthetic thoughts. Jiang Wenzhan also made a good combination with modern materials, in his creations using precise details and swift strokes, blending new media printing technology into traditional ink-and-wash landscapes (Lizun et al., 2022). The comparison foregrounded the differences in brushstroke practice between cultures: van Gogh and Monet showed emotional expression of an experience through a loose, almost uncontrollable stroke, while their Chinese counterparts showcased a careful thought process by limiting line work to specific areas that mirror philosophical meaning.

4.3. Composition Characteristics

This section expands on how composition techniques differ between Claude Monet, Vincent van Gogh, and Traditional Chinese Flower-and-Bird Paintings from the Chang'an School. Each artist and tradition has shown unique approaches to composition, reflecting their cultural philosophies and artistic objectives (Refer to [Table 3](#)).

Table 3: Comparative Analysis of Composition Characteristics

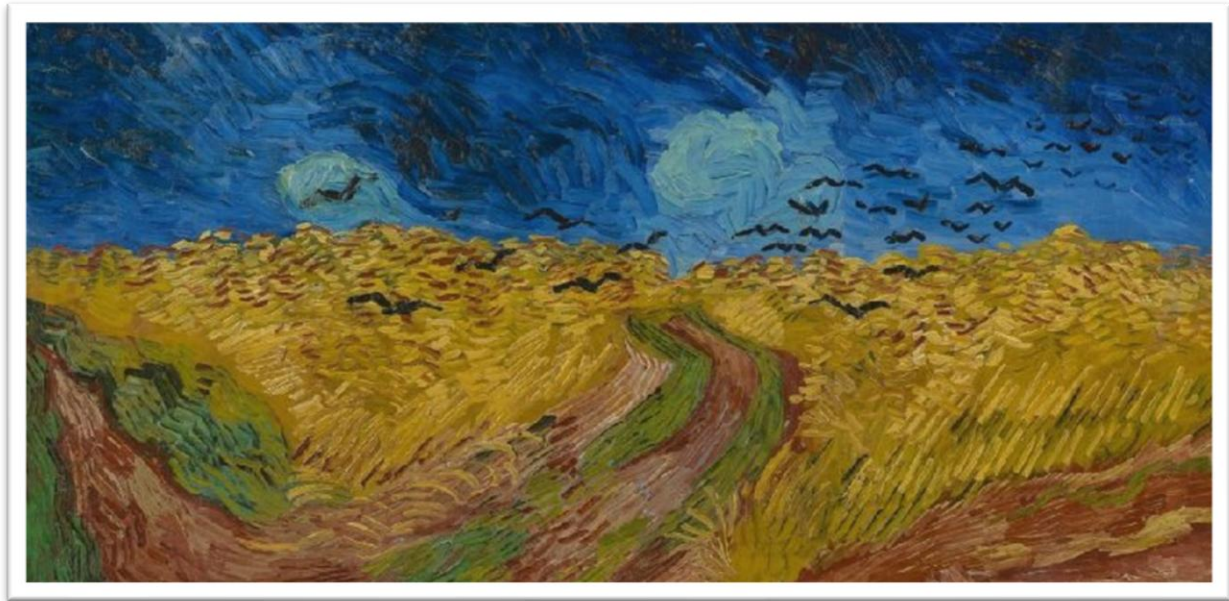
Aspect	Vincent van Gogh	Claude Monet	Traditional Chinese Flower-and-Bird Paintings (Chang'an School)
Composition Style	Asymmetrical, dynamic	Balanced, harmonious, three-dimensional depth	Structured, symmetrical, spatially cohesive
Example	<i>Wheatfield with Crows</i> : Dynamic composition guiding the viewer's eye to areas of emotional intensity (White Clouds, n.d.)	<i>Water Lilies</i> : Use of foreground, middle, and background to create depth (Desmarais, 2021)	<i>Lotus and Kingfishers</i> : Blending traditional subjects with balance and simplicity (Deng, 2022)
Purpose	Convey emotional atmosphere and movement	Create a sensory experience of fleeting moments	Reflect harmony, calmness, and symbolic balance (Feng et al., 2017)
Philosophy	Emphasises emotional and psychological depth	Focus on sensory perception, capturing light and atmosphere	Rooted in Chinese philosophical concepts of balance, order, and symbolism
Use of Depth	Emphasises irregularity and movement, less focused on depth	Clear use of foreground, middle, and background for depth	Often structured, focusing on natural order and spatial depth (Zhang, 2022)

Monet was famous for striking the perfect balance, harmony, and depth in his compositions. He frequently used the background, middle ground, and foreground to suggest space and pull our eyes into an image ([Kleiner, 2017](#)). In line with Impressionist objectives, Monet composed his work to provide an experience of the subject matter as it was experienced by a person seeing what is reflected in that moment. In works such as *Water Lilies*, for instance, the use of dynamic balance in composition to communicate the flow and liquidity found in nature is an embodied experience through these principles ([Desmarais, 2021](#)). This method not only mirrored Monet's Impressionist ideals but also reinvented landscape painting by focusing on the viewer's emotional and sensory involvement before exact depiction.

Van Gogh's work learned from his lessons in asymmetry and dynamism; he used colour balanced with brushwork to guide the eye of the viewer through an image. Impressionists painted landscapes and narrative paintings too, but his works such as *Wheatfield with Crows* and *Irises* (Refer to [Image 5](#)) began to be less structured in approach while more emotionally intense at the same time. His swirling forms and ragged compositions provide a feeling of mobility and chaos for the viewer ([White Clouds, n.d.](#)). Van Gogh's compositions are used mainly to complement the emotional

atmosphere of the work, but could not be mentioned in words including balance or symmetry.

Image 5: Wheatfield with Crows, 1890 by Van Gogh



Source: Van Gogh Museum ([Van Gogh, 1890](#))

The Chinese flower-and-bird paintings of the Chang'an School pay great attention to structure and symmetry. All of these works are deeply influenced by Chinese aesthetic principles rooted in notions of balance, restraint, and order. For example, in the works of Kang Shiyao, *Lotus and Kingfishers* (Refer to [Image 6](#)), traditional Chinese motifs are underpinned by some Western elements but remain simple and balanced compositionally ([Deng, 2022](#)). Jiang Wenzhan, also a master of the Chang'an School, employed slanted views and triangular shapes, creating energy and dynamism while maintaining philosophical elegance and symbolic depth ([Wenzhan, 2006](#)). Jiang achieves this by using these compositional techniques in a novel way, allowing him to fuse historical beauty with modern themes, linking past and present. His works, such as *Cherry Blossoms in Spring* and *Autumn Birds*, depict nature's beauty while addressing societal and environmental challenges (Refer to [Image 7](#)) ([Mutual Art, 2024](#)).

Bridging the gap between form and content, Jiang both conserved the tradition—he worked in a lineage of Chinese painting that stretched back thousands of years—while redefining its expression for contemporary usage. Many compositions of the Chang'an School are always trying to find a good balance between structure and fluidity. An instance is seen in the work of Shi Lu, who imbued his floral and avian subjects with distant views, adding to a monumental feeling that propagated metaphysical connections between subject matter and the greater natural order ([Wei, 2022](#)). Chang'an School paintings, in general, harmonise and unify the space within their compositions to create a sense of calm, natural order, with every element playing its respective role.

Image 6: Lotus Kingfishers, 1984 by Kang Shiyao



Source: Mutual Art (Shiyao, 1984)

Image 7: Red Plum Blossoms in Spring, 2006 by Jiang Wenzhan



Source: Mutual Art (2024)

4.4. Light and Shadow

This section investigates the use of light and shadow in the works of Claude Monet, Vincent van Gogh, and Traditional Chinese Flower-and-Bird Paintings of the Chang'an School. It focuses on the differences in how each tradition manipulates light to achieve either symbolic or naturalistic effects (Refer to [Table 4](#)).

Table 4: Comparative Analysis of Light and Shadow

Aspect	Vincent van Gogh	Claude Monet	Traditional Chinese Flower-and-Bird Paintings (Chang'an School)
Use of Light and Shadow	Bold, expressive, emotional contrasts	Subtle gradations, refined transitions to capture natural light (Wildenstein, 2022 ; Newberry, 2020)	Minimal, symbolic use of light to enhance emotion and ambiance (Scott, 2021)
Example	<i>Starry Night</i> : Bold contrasts enhance emotional intensity	<i>Water Lilies</i> : Subtle transitions in light create depth and mood (Newberry, 2020)	Shi Lu: Dramatic contrasts to enhance form and storytelling (Li, 2023); Kang Shiyao: Subtle transitions for a calm atmosphere (Chen, 2024)
Philosophy	Enhance emotional intensity and psychological depth	Capture fleeting moments of natural light and atmosphere	Symbolism, evokes philosophical meaning, harmony, and ambiance
The goal of Light Use	Create emotional depth and expressiveness	Add natural depth, reflect transient atmospheric conditions	Highlight symbolic meaning, not focused on realism (Feng et al., 2017)

Monet's approach to light and shadow was central to his Impressionist style, which aimed to capture transient atmospheric conditions. His "en plein air" technique allowed him to paint outdoors, directly observing the effects of natural light and weather on his landscapes ([Wildenstein, 2022](#)). Monet used subtle gradations of colour and refined transitions of light to create mood and atmosphere, often without relying on sharp contrasts. His use of chiaroscuro involved delicate shifts in light and shadow, adding depth and dimension while emphasising the natural flickering of light in works including *Water Lilies* (Refer to [Image 8](#)) ([Newberry, 2020](#)). This technique is a stark contrast to the more symbolic use of light in Chinese paintings.

Van Gogh employed a more emotionally expressive use of light and shadow, often emphasising the emotional or psychological aspects of his work. Van Gogh also used light and shadow in great contrast to add a dynamic emotional dimension, an approach that did not come as subtly as Monet's, as seen in works including *Starry Night* ([Lobel, 2024](#)). By playing with colour and brushwork, he could paint more depth and intensity in his medium than most classical methods, breaking away from traditional techniques and influencing movements including Expressionism ([Lobel, 2024](#)). This emotional and dynamic use of light contrasts with the symbolic use of light in traditional Chinese paintings.

Image 8: Water Lilies, 1906 by Monet



Source: Art Institute Chicago ([Monet, 1906](#))

Even though Monet and van Gogh painted what they saw of natural sunlight, the use of light and shadow by the Chang'an School was more restrained and symbolic. For example, Shi Lu used dramatic contrasts in his works to highlight the form and surface of objects, emphasising light and shadow as part of a story ([Li, 2023](#)). In contrast, Kang Shiyao preferred subtle and gradual transitions of light, creating a calm and refined atmosphere that stressed harmony and balance, rather than adhering to naturalistic shading ([Chen, 2024](#)). On the one hand, Kang focused on gentle light shifts, on the other hand, Jiang Wenzhan more directly employed natural lighting. However, beneath their differing techniques, both artists shared a symbolic approach to illumination. Jiang Wenzhan accurately depicted the natural light of the Qinling Mountains, but this realistic lighting was always tied metaphorically to broader themes ([Chen, 2024](#)). In the end, both painters employed light not only to accurately authenticate their images but also as a device used to bolster more profound undercurrents of philosophical thought and culture within their work. In addition to light and shadow details, the concept of rendering realistic sunlight effects is often eschewed in typical Chang'an School work as being symbolic rather than practical or effective for creating moods. Monet uses chiaroscuro in a very light way that places more emphasis on the manipulation of light and shade, while the Chang'an School is focused on philosophical meaning rather than realism.

5. The Influence of Modernity on Traditional Art Forms

5.1. Modern Adaptations in Chinese and Western Art

Comparison of contemporary transformations to the traditional motifs in Chinese and Western artworks inspired by flowers and birds shows the role of changes associated with technology and theoretical innovation. In China, new techniques and materials have been utilised by contemporary artists while reinventing the time-honoured tradition of flower-and-bird motifs. For example, artists such as Xu Lei have combined classical Chinese aesthetics with contemporary media by embedding photography and digital manipulation into traditional ink painting (Lord, 2023). Through this combination, the aesthetic of harmony and balance, which is closely tied to Chinese flower-and-bird paintings, is maintained. This exemplifies how digital tools are democratizing traditional Chinese art and making it more accessible to global audiences. Meanwhile, contemporary Western artists are also adopting the conventional still life genre, often incorporating digital techniques to broaden its impact.

Digital painting, video art, and 3D installations are other forms of technology that have been used to modernise flower-and-bird imagery by playing with scale, colour, or movement in ways that could not be realised before. Here, multimedia artist Rashaad Newsome uses digital collage techniques to animate art historical still life elements in new arrangements that challenge established norms of identity, race, aesthetics, and history (San José Museum of Art, 2021). The result is a more seamless crossover between the past and future, utilizing historical iconographies inserted with modern sociopolitical references. The intensity of globalisation, on the other hand, causes a spread of these models and leads to increasingly complex hybridity. Postmodernism from the West has been gaining impact on Chinese contemporary artists, who have begun disrupting China's art scene by deconstructing traditional hierarchies and narratives (Gladston, 2014). Digital tools have made this possible, producing art that spans countries and cultures while blending elements from long-standing Chinese philosophical traditions with those of Western society, resulting in a new contemporary take. Besides, Western artists are using the concepts of harmony, balance, and interconnectedness with the universe in their work to explore a more holistic approach (Wang et al., 2024). This exchange of ideas reflects an increasing cross-cultural conversation, where both Eastern and Western artists are inspired by each other's traditions, enriching their artistic expressions while creating a more globally interconnected art system.

5.2. Globalisation and Cultural Exchange

Such cross-pollination of artistic techniques and inspirations has come about due to globalisation. The information, ideas, and materials are disseminated so fast throughout the world these days that artists can access influences from all over with ease. Thus, one of the hallmarks of many modern art forms is a blending or synthesis between styles. Modern Chinese art, such as the dance band lighting and internal bird painting heritage, is confusingly washed using contemporary abstract expressionism and post-modern deconstruction of Western influences (Chen, 2021). This interchange of cultures helps unite cultures and transposes boundaries. For example, Chinese postmodernist artists often appropriate irony and pastiche as Western techniques to re-explore classical motifs with challenges to traditional values and structures (Ho, 2020). The merger of Eastern traditions with Western conceptual perspectives results in new meanings and

presentations on cultural legacies. Arguably culturally specific albeit universal in a way, artists such as Cai Guo-Qiang have bridged the gap between Western performance art-rooted philosophy and iconography with those of traditional Chinese gunpowder-and-ink notated practices where the concept has been to take on an aesthetically grand scale (Karetzky, 2016). This blend of Daoist philosophy and postmodern critique illustrates how contemporary Chinese art negotiates a very difficult space between the intricacies of global artistic discourse.

The merger of Eastern and Western philosophies in the contemporary global art world is leading to great exchanges of thought, enriching creative contexts across borders. The Eastern schools of thought such as Daoism and Zen Buddhism, have inspired Western artists to display the aesthetic sense with minimalistic expressions of the inseparable embrace of nature (Lomas, 2016). It is a way this conversation empowers Western creators to take off the mantle of individualism and put on simplicity and interconnectedness. Agnes Martin, for example, looks to Zen principles in her art practice, where she uses simple forms and a balanced presence influenced by emotion (Morley, 2016). It is all part of the Western world realising a wider step toward embracing Eastern cultural practices that, when used, become tools for being more contemplative in creative processes. Art techniques are no longer limited by cultural origin due to globalisation. This hybridity leads to the creation of art forms that exist outside national boundaries, inevitably interconnected in nature and having multiple dimensions, leading up to engaging with various visions.

6. Discussion

Cultural and philosophical roots in both vertical and transversal dimensions are showcased through the comparative study of traditional Chinese painting-flower-and-bird paintings. This examination analysed those codes with the help of Erwin Panofsky's Iconography and Iconology, in decoding significance upon even deeper layers throughout each piece to show again how different cultures envision nature based on their artistic craft.

6.1. Pre-iconographic Description

The decorative and precise thick brush stroke comes from the classical Chinese art tradition where images of flowers, leaves, or animals are typically drawn on paper or silk scrolls accompanied by auspicious meanings through symbolic colours — red for good luck and blue if calmness is intended. And these, in turn, owe a debt to Confucian and Daoist conceptions of unity in diversity, harmony with nature (and one another), and balance among opposites within the whole. Kang Shiyao mediates these themes to produce reflection-oriented meditations of insight and ethics on the human-nature relationship; a realist endeavour that places importance on how things are portrayed over expression conveyed in a raw fashion. As every brush stroke is intended to show that mankind is only a thread in the extensive web of nature with intrinsic moral values. In addition, the Western flower-and-bird painting is good at light modelling which goes back to Impressionism and Post-Impressionist. However, artists including Claude Monet and Vincent van Gogh painted nature in a more fluid naturalistic manner. Painted softly, with strong free brushstrokes and highly unrepeatable light-time, wise scenes, and animations. In contrast to the smooth brushwork of Monet, Van Gogh's *Sunflowers* with its turbulent strokes convey an emotional intensity, which transforms his work into a very personal take on nature. Whereas Western art uses colours to induce sensations

and feelings embodying experiences, emphasizing the uniqueness of perceptions; Chinese art reflects a society that grows out of harmony.

6.2. Iconographic Analysis

Panofsky's Iconographic analysis is the second level that enables us to reference symbols within cultural and socio-historical backgrounds. Peonies and cranes are two typical subjects of Chinese traditional flower-and-bird painting. Peony and crane are symbols, with the peonies associated with wealth because of their moral language value in Confucian, Daoist thought about nature containing ethical virtues. Ying Qinjiang and others in the Sung Yao Zhen School, knowing of these ancient emblems, put modern overtones to them, hewn from lines coming straight down the tube. These are all spiritual aspects with profound philosophical and ethical meanings, symbolising balance, harmony, and relationship. By way of contrast, Western flower-and-bird painting is characterized by freedom in personal emotional expression over traditional symbolic aspects. Van Gogh's *Sunflower* conveys both emotions associated with the colours he chose, vibrant yellow for warmth and inner turmoil, reflecting a personal rather than cultural narrative. Similarly, the flowers in Monet's *Water Lilies* were studies of light and colour—those ephemeral moments or moods caught in bloom. These iconographic differences speak to a broader value disconnect: in Chinese landscape painting, natural forms are symbolic of cosmic order; meanwhile, Western artists (from the Romantic and Impressionist movements through watercolour landscapes) approached nature as a vehicle of self-expression and emotion, with personal experience trumping universal truth.

6.3. Iconological Interpretation

Iconological analysis seeks to find more than representation; it works towards extracting the cultural or philosophical wisdom behind art. Daoist and Confucian notions about the unity of all things animate traditional Chinese nature representations, such as flower-and-bird paintings. The colours signify life cycles, unity, and balance, framing the symmetrical structures. They also relate to how people connect to nature, a concept deeply ingrained in Chinese cosmology, aligning with one's surroundings and the seasons. The Chang'an School's modern artists, like Kang Shiyao and Jiang Wenzha, blend classical expression with contemporary political and cultural narratives. Using modern materials and ideas, they express timeless philosophies of harmony, balance, and interconnectedness, which remain relevant in modern Chinese society. Western flower-and-bird paintings, such as Van Gogh's *Sunflowers* and Monet's *Water Lilies*, depict nature through human perception. Western modernism is entirely subjective, with nature frequently referring only to the emotional life of an individual. Western artists did not view nature symbolically but rather used it to reflect on themselves and access their inner emotions. This highlights the focus on Western subjectivity (the framing of individuals observing nature) and intersubjectivity (personal modes of how one relates to what they see), in contrast to the collective symbolism in Chinese art. The difference between the two illustrates how each tradition perceives nature: one as a universal moral and philosophical truth, the other as a personal, internal dimension.

7. Conclusion

Due to the help of Panofsky's Iconography and Iconology Theory, the paper can understand further why nature painted in Chinese flower-and-bird paintings differs

from the Western tradition. At a pre-iconographic level, Chinese art uses image elements that are more precise and harmonious in structure, with colour as a symbol, while Western painting tends to use dynamic brushstrokes that emerge from sensory awareness of nature. Iconographic analysis indicates that Chinese motifs are grounded in Confucianist and Daoist cultural significances, emphasising community integration with nature and an agrarian concern for the land. Western motifs, on the other hand, are concerned with how personal values have been formed by emotional experiences in nature. Iconographical interpretation reflects Chinese art as informed by cosmology and social values, while Western naturalism involves human perception or emotion-based imagery.

The results above confirm the theoretical frameworks of Panofsky. As mentioned earlier, the framework and results suggest that this perspective is useful in understanding cultural or symbolic differences in art. There may be more research on how digital technology is influencing older art forms. For Chinese artists, this could mean using traditional brush strokes while incorporating digital media. Western artists, on the other hand, might use digital tools to bring new depth to motifs such as flowers and birds. Meanwhile, globalization allows for the reshaping of classical forms into contemporary styles, creating hybrid or crossover approaches that blend Eastern and Western elements. As these cross-cultural exchanges continue, they will contribute toward the global art landscape and deepen our comprehension of how nature is presented in diverse cultures.

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

This research did not require IRB (Institutional Review Board) approval and consent to participate because this study does not contain any human participation.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of Interest.

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